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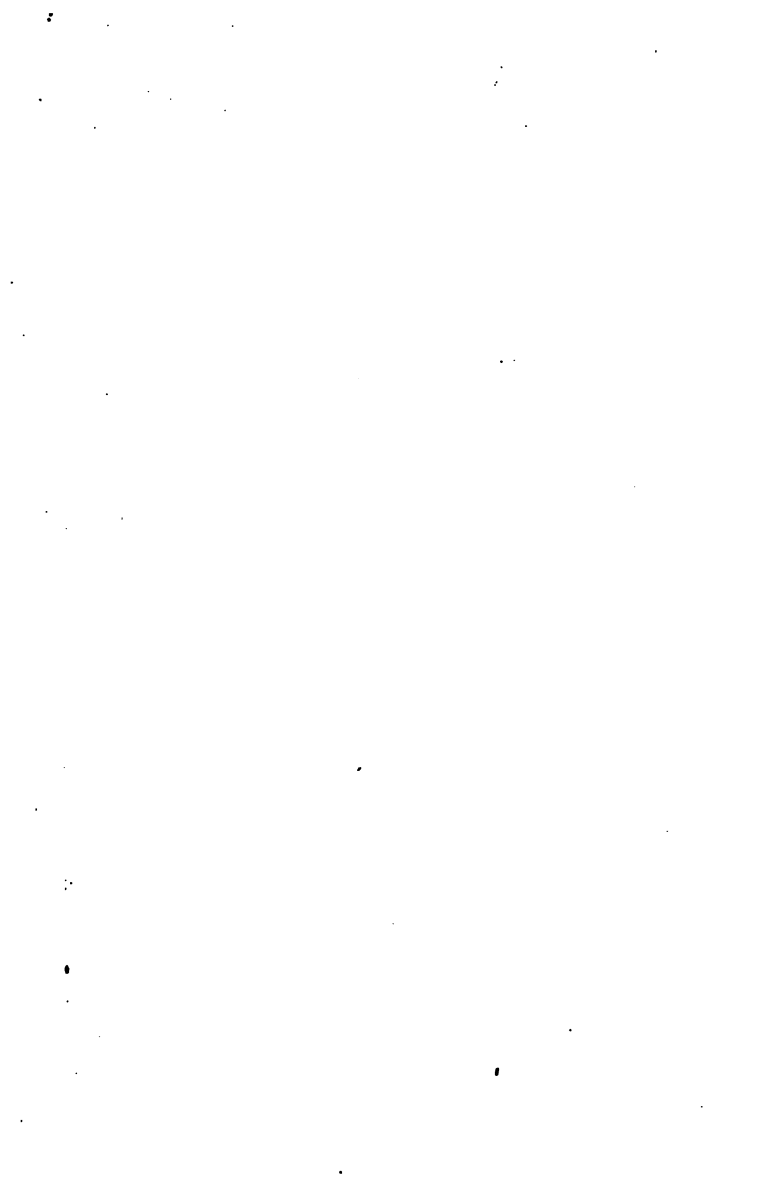
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THE
MYSTEROUS **R**UBIES
AND OTHER STORIES







THE SNOWDROP PAPERS,

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THE
MYSTERIOUS RUBIES:
AND OTHER STORIES.

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THE MYSTERIOUS RUBIES.

CHAPTER I.

QNE stormy but sultry day in July, a girl about thirteen years of age was standing under a large drooping willow tree, which hung over a dank pond. The day was most dreary, the rain had just ceased, the sky was dark with leaden clouds, and the grass around the pond was at once wet and dirty; large rain-drops, wanting the rainbow hue produced by the sun's rays on clear water, splashed sullenly on the young girl's dusky uncovered tresses.

The poor child's face was in keeping

with the miserable day; large unshed tears quivered in the dark eyes, the crimson lips trembled and pouted; slender eyebrows were puckered into a desponding frown.

“Rightly am I named Mara,” she muttered half-aloud, “what am I but bitterness, and sullen despair?”

What could give rise to such unchild-like thoughts—thoughts incompatible with her age? A childhood of cruelly cold treatment, and almost total lack of love—no parents’ fond care, no brother’s laughing, teasing, affection; no sister’s loving sympathy; naught but an alien’s cold care and paid kindness. For poor Mara Heath had from a little child been brought up in the family of Mr. Brodwell, a well-to-do timber merchant, of no kith or kin; she had never known family love, and was totally alone in the world, save for the busy bustling family for whom she had so little sympathy. She believed herself to be kept from charity by them, and her sensitive, haughty spirit recoiled and shrank from the idea. Mara’s earliest recollections were of herself, a tiny child, set to mind still smaller

toddles; to tend their tottering footsteps, to amuse them, dry their tears, to be reprimanded for their torn frocks; of weary tears, in the noon-day heat; of plaintive, half-formed wishes for a kindly helping hand, as she shrank from Mrs. Brodwell's stern glances and uplifted finger, as she stumbled over her daily task of baby lessons. Poor little weary toddle, yet there were some brief glimpses of sunshine in her darkened life; of romping games in the winter twilight; of races in the sun-set hour; of musings under the golden rain of the laburnum tree, in the sweet spring evenings.

On this day in question, a passionate outburst of indignation, at an unfair accusation, had sent her into disgrace, and she had come to muse and weep by the dull pond, which, with the drooping branches of the willows, seemed most in harmony with her desponding mood. Her reverie was interrupted by a summons to the house, where Mrs. Brodwell gave her some needlework to do during her visit to the neighbouring town. Mara sat down with her task, a few tears coursing



down her face. Two pretty fair-haired children ran in.

“Mara, Herbie has taken my doll.” “Mara, Annie is so cross.”

Seeing Mara in tears, they stopped, their blue eyes rounding with wonder. Then Herbie ran up to her, and throwing his arms round her, whispered—

“Don’t cry, I love you.”

The child’s loving heart had penetrated her trouble. Mara gave him an almost convulsive embrace. How she loved this child ; this sweet little one, who alone cared for her in her alien home. Annie said nothing, but standing aloof with her finger at her lips, watched them curiously. Presently she remarked—

“Mamma says Mara is very naughty.”

“Nay, Annie,” cried Herbie, “she is good,” and again his rosy lips were pressed to Mara’s wet cheek. Mara took up her work, while Herbie nestled at her feet.

When Mrs. Brodwell returned, and found the imposed task uncompleted, she scolded her severely. Mara stole out into the kitchen,

and was weeping by the window, when Mr. Brodwell came in.

“ Why, Mara, lass, in disgrace ? ” Mara sobbed still more ; touched by her distress, Mr. Brodwell stooped and raised her.

“ They are so unkind to me,” she cried.

“ Nay, poor child, I fear you are naughty very often ; but come, cheer up, this evening you shall do what you like.”

Mara’s look of gratitude moved him much, and that evening he protected her from his children, and Mara nestled behind his chair with a book.

About ten months afterwards, little Herbie was taken ill and died ; in his illness, he called for Mara, and she tenderly nursed him ; he breathed his last with one little wasted hand clasped round her finger. Her wild grief brought her for a time into sympathy with the parents in their sorrow. Oh ! what did she not suffer, when she kissed the fair little face for the last time, as he lay in the coffin, his curls clustering round his head ; life seemed but a dreary waste, now the one loved and loving creature was gone. But



Mrs. Brodwell cut off a little curl and gave it to Mara, with a kiss on her sad brow ; as she did so, a tear fell on Mara's upturned face. Oh ! that tear and that kiss, how much coldness and severity in after days they made amends for.

Mara now strove hard to do her duties well, but often sad tears fell on the open page or work, and her heart was " very sorry for poor little Herbie."

Mara was past fifteen, when one day her life's fortune experienced a great and happy change ; but before that time came, another summer's evening saw her sobbing by the old pond, in disgrace again. " Would she never be happy ? Was her life always to be so drear and miserable ?" Such were her musings, as she stood alone.

The next morning a letter came to Mrs. Brodwell, that seemed to excite her much, and made her look anxiously at Mara. After breakfast she held a long and secret consultation with her husband, and afterwards desired Mara " to read out of doors and amuse herself," and, much surprised, Mara obeyed.

“To amuse herself,” she could hardly recall a like mandate from Mrs. Brodwell.

In vain Mara tried to read the book she had taken with her; surely that letter had something to do with her, who could it be from?

After dinner, Mrs. Brodwell took her upstairs and examined her scanty wardrobe, in search of a presentable dress; alas, Mara’s best dress had a very untidy appearance, seeing which, Mrs. Brodwell exclaimed—

“Really, Mara, you should have taken more care of your clothes.”

“But I’ve had this dress eleven months,” said Mara, sulkily, but with excited eyes. What could be going to happen?

“Well, you must wear Minna’s blue one.”

Now this dress of Minna’s was too large, yet scarcely long enough for the tall slim Mara.

“I would rather wear my own,” she cried, with a flushed face, but Mrs. Brodwell was firm, and soon Mara was dressed in the bright blue ill-fitting dress.

“Where am I going?” Mara asked.

"You will see," was the reply, "stay here till I call you."

By-and-by, a carriage drove up to the door, the bell rang, some one passed into the drawing-room. Mara's curiosity grew intense. At last, after half-an-hour had passed, Mara was summoned downstairs. In the drawing-room, a middle aged lady was sitting, who had a worn face that had once been very handsome, large dark eyes, and soft brown hair, sprinkled with grey. There was an anxious excited look on her face, as she gazed at the young girl.

Mara was tall for her age, with a slight unformed figure, a delicate face of rather a long oval, a well curved crimson mouth, large, lustrous eyes, with a wistful, yearning look in them, and pale olive skin. Her wavy locks, clustered in luxuriant tresses round her well-formed head. A wistful, childish, eager girl she looked.

"This is Miss Wentworth, your benefactress," said Mrs. Brodwell.

The lady rose, and taking Mara's hands, kissed her on the forehead. At the affectionate caress, Mara burst into tears.

"Mara, child, how dare you behave so badly."

"Poor girl," said Miss Wentworth, "kindly leave us a little time, Mrs. Brodwell."

When they were left alone, Miss Wentworth drew a chair to the window, and sitting down, drew Mara to her knee. Mara's face was crimson, and her eyes drooped bashfully. The lady seemed strangely moved, tears gathered fast in her eyes.

"So, poor child," she murmured, tenderly, "they never told you you had a benefactress, they made you believe they kept you from charity. But I have paid them a yearly sum."

A light came into Mara's troubled eyes, and her delicate head was proudly raised, but then it drooped again, and she again burst into a passion of tears. Miss Wentworth gently drew her head to her shoulder, she kissed her affectionately, gently whispering—

"But now, my darling, you will come to me?"

The girl's eyes searched hers eagerly, then slipping down, she seized Miss Wentworth's hand, crying in an eager way—



“Will you indeed take me from here? Who are you? Why did you never come to see me? Who am I? Who were my parents?”

Miss Wentworth took the excited child's face in her hands, and her voice trembled as she answered—

“You shall come to my home; I am Caroline Wentworth, who takes a great interest in you, Mara Heath, a poor little orphan. I thought you would be happier with other children, but I see I have been mistaken, they have deceived me. I cannot tell why I have kept myself unknown to you; but it was from a good motive, and I meant you to know a lady paid them to keep you, but not my name.” Then seeing Mara's eyes still had an unsatisfied look in them, she added—
“Your parents' name I cannot tell.”

“Don't you know?” asked Mara.

“I do not,” was the reply.

But the words came huskily, and Mara being too excited to notice keenly, was satisfied with the reply, and in a broken voice said—

"They are dead."

"Yes; I've heard they are."

After a long pause, Miss Wentworth asked—

"Can you love me, dear," and then Mara clung to her, and cried with earnest passion.

"Yes, yes, oh! yes." Then she added timidly. "But how came you to know me?"

After a little hesitating, Miss Wentworth said—"I found you a poor little baby, I kept you till you were four years old, and then sent you here. I will now make you very happy if I can, and will fetch you to-morrow morning."

After a long consultation, during which she won from Mara the history of her trials and of little Herbie's death, Miss Wentworth departed to return to her hotel in Marston.

Mara's reverie was broken by the entrance of Mrs. Brodwell.

"So, Mara, you are to leave us. I hope you told Miss Wentworth we endeavoured to do our duty by you."

"I told her the truth," was the haughty reply.

“ You are an ungrateful girl.”

“ I’ve not much to be grateful for ; it was very unkind, to make me believe you kept me from charity, when all the time I had a kind benefactress.”

And Mara burst from the room.

That evening was spent by Herbie’s grave, and as she wove a wreath of roses and forget-me-nots for the little grave, softer thoughts stole into her mind ; and the first soft dewy drops of the blessed task of forgiving our enemies crept into her young heart. “ Love your enemies.” This was the refrain of the song echoing and re-echoing in Mara’s soul as she raised her eyes, suffused with tears, to the sky, o’er which swept the gold-tinged clouds. When at last the wreath was finished, the “ shades of evening ” had softly enfolded the little hill-side churchyard and the far outlying fields and distant purple-tinged hills. Quietly Mara placed the wreath around the cross, and, kneeling down, rested her head on the flower-jewelled turf ; quiet but intense tears fell on the grass, on which her brow pressed.

“Herbie, Herbie, in all my good fortune, I will never forget you, dearie.”

Quietly she left the churchyard, and soon the moon's tranquil rays caused the tear-drops on the forget-me-nots to gleam in the fading eve, like thrice-tried silver.

The rest of the evening passed quietly away, Mrs. Brodwell's behaviour to Mara seemed changed, for she appeared anxious to please her; and Mara, how strange to feel so fearless and so tranquil, the children gazed on her with wonder.

It had been Mrs. Brodwell's wish to keep Mara in ignorance of her benefactress's existence, alleging as her reason, that if she knew it she would be so untractable.

The next morning Miss Wentworth called for her, and with mingled feelings, Mara left her unsympathetic friends and the scene of her many trials. The children seemed sorry, now the time had come, to bid their often ill-used companion “good-bye.” Mrs. Brodwell, touched by Mara's new humility and softened demeanour, murmured as she kissed her cheek—



"We might have got on better together, Mara," and Mara accepted the rather lame effort at conciliation, and Mr. Brodwell said with a kindly gleam in his eyes—

"We shall miss you, lassie."

Mara's heart beat high, as the village was left behind, and, with her hand clasped in her kind friend's, she set out on her new life.

After a long hot journey in the railway train, they arrived, in the cool of the evening, at the station of a large country town.

"This is Hayfield," said Miss Wentworth, turning with a cheerful smile to her young companion; Mara's eyes brightened and she gave a smile and sigh of satisfaction. Hiring a cab, they drove through the quiet quaint streets of the old town, along a level road, bordered with stately elm trees, to a moderate-sized house.

When they were in the cosily-furnished dining-room, Mara's joy seemed complete. After supper, Miss Wentworth led her upstairs into a pretty little bedroom, with many pretty devices for both comfort and elegance.

"This is your room, dear Mara."

"Mine, oh, you are too good."

"Nay, you are my own adopted child," said Miss Wentworth, kissing her.

How joyful the next day was, the cosy breakfast, the pleasant morning chat, the walk into the town, the early dinner, the drive in the pony carriage, the cheerful tea table, the pleasant evening; and yet that night Mara's pillow was wet with tears, for in her new home were no souvenirs of "Herbie," and hers was not a nature that could easily forget.





CHAPTER II.

FOR some time her life was very happy, her new friend was so kindly tender, she thought of nothing but her *protégé's* welfare and happiness, and it was so wholly new and delightful to Mara to be able to do nothing but read and enjoy herself. Miss Wentworth, after a rest of a few weeks, finding Mara's education had been much neglected, generously sent her to a good school in Hayfield, and there fresh trials awaited her. It was hard to feel herself indebted for her education to a stranger, hard to associate with bright-faced happy girls, possessors of own homes; and then Mara was shy and awkward, but extremely sensitive: still there were the happy evenings spent in the society of Miss Wentworth, who-

was fast becoming dear to Mara, and after a time and many struggles with her many failings, she became more bright and cheerful.

When she was eighteen years old, Miss Wentworth in spite of the girl's sorrow, sent her to a high class finishing school, a long distance away. Indeed Miss Wentworth was very anxious to have Mara well educated, sparing no expense, and Mara worked hard, with a profound interest to second her endeavours. French, German, Italian, music and singing, together with other accomplishments, went far to make up the *tout-ensemble* of the now accomplished and gifted girl's education.

At nineteen her school days ended ; Miss Wentworth then introduced her in the good middle class society she moved in. Mara, who had not yet conquered her shyness, was at first very diffident and nervous, sensitive to a fault. But her friend's encouraging faith in her merits helped her on ; and after some time she began to take courage and hope, and with it all she had a yearning for something higher, which made her call her-

self ungrateful, and endeavour to make up for her rebellious thoughts to Miss Wentworth, by being doubly dutiful and affectionate, and untiring in her efforts to please her kind patroness.

One day late in the summer, or rather the beginning of autumn, Mara was seated in her room musing. She was going that night to a ball, and at Miss Wentworth's urgent request she had permitted her to choose her dress, which she had not yet seen.

Mara was much improved : love and energy had done much for her, her face was very beautiful, her features clear and decided, her nose being almost Grecian, her eyes long, large and full of a lustrous fire. Her hair was black and very wavy, and gathered into a cluster at the back of the dainty high-bred looking head. She was tall, slight and graceful, though quiet in her movements. Truly Miss Wentworth might well feel satisfied with her lovely charge, the girl she had trained and enlivened. And Mara herself, she has come into her kingdom, has begun to reign, and finds it very pleasant;

yet though she knows that others feel and acknowledge the power of her beauty, there is no coquetry in the full grave eye, or in the whole sweet face. For there is still the wistful shade on brow and lip, speaking of a melancholy childhood; and though now Mara is full twenty years old, the past is not forgotten.

“People say she is too quiet and grave for her years; but few dream that the stately maiden who looks so calm, so almost cold, struggles with timidity and an early-implanted sense that she is incapable of pleasing others.

After a cosy tea, Miss Wentworth took Mara to a small dressing-room and showed her the dress.

“It is white, flowing, and gauzy, but too white and cold-looking for her own style,” Mara thinks, as she looks at it in a little dismay—

“May I not wear some colour, auntie?”
(so she sometimes called Miss Wentworth).

The latter smiles and says—

“We shall see.”

And, summoning the maid, between them they arrange the luxuriant hair, and robe her in the flowing robe.

But as Mara gazes in the long pier-glass, she sees a dark-haired, pale-faced spectre gleaming at her from its depths, and again feels dismayed.

"It is my wish, Mara, that you go robed like this."

"Very well," Mara answers cheerfully, but with a young girl's regret, as she thinks of the rich hues she could have chosen to accord with her olive skin.

But with a smile, her friend opens a casket, and reveals, to Mara's amazement, the most splendid rubies, flaming from their white satin bed like liquid fire.

"To reward your docility, you shall wear these; they are worth a fortune. I bought them, and now give them to you."

With trembling fingers she decks the girl's neck and arms with the glittering, flashing jewels.

"Are these for me? They are too good for me! I cannot accept them!"

With a sudden start, she rose to her feet, and
 Mrs. V. looked at her with a look of surprise,
 saying—

"Why do you look so white, Emma? I
 give them out to you."

"Oh, no, I am not feeling any better."

"Emma, my dear, you are not feeling any better
 with Emma and I am not feeling any better
 to hear you say so."

"Emma, my dear, you are not feeling any better
 with Emma and I am not feeling any better
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which she arrayed herself in black velvet and a suite of old-fashioned pearls.

With what high spirits they went to the ball ! How bright Mara looked, now and then holding up an arm to see the effect of the jewels gleaming in the light of the carriage lamps.

The first part of the evening passed pleasantly away ; but in the pause of a dance, Mara saw a young girl, about eighteen or so, gazing at her, or rather at the jewels, with widely-distended eyes, a sort of terror or amazement in them.

Mara looked surprised, and somewhat hurt and offended.

The dance concluded. She was resting in a conservatory, when presently the same girl entered with a handsome lady, evidently her mother, who had classical features, placid grey eyes, and fair hair.

The girl was very lovely, in the style that being opposed to her own, Mara intensely admired ; very fair, with regular features, long curling brown hair, and bright azure orbs.

On seeing Mara she turned pale, and eagerly whispered to her mother, who, with a mixture of haughtiness, interest and fear, surveyed the rubies through her eye-glass, and then turned her gaze on the wearer herself.

With crimson cheeks and haughty bearing, Mara quitted the room.

Later on, the mother and daughter, accompanied by a handsome young man of four-and-twenty, whose appearance generally proclaimed him to be the son of the elder lady, and brother of the younger, met Mara in the ball-room, and again there were the curious looks.

Mara felt bitterly hurt. What was there in herself or rubies to excite their curiosity. All pleasure in the lovely ornaments forsook her, the gay scene around her failed to amuse her, and seeking Miss Wentworth, she said—

“ Let us go home.”

“ Why, Mara ? ” was the anxious question, as Miss Wentworth looked in alarm at the girl’s flushed face and angry expression.

"Because," Mara replied (excited tears springing to her dark eyes), "there are some people here who look at the rubies in such a rude but anxious way, as though there were some mystery connected with them."

Miss Wentworth turned red and then very white.

"Are they ladies?"

"Yes, two; by appearance mother and daughter, also a gentleman."

"We will go home if you wish," said Miss Wentworth rising hurriedly, and drawing on her shawl.

And so they started for home. Miss Wentworth parried all the girl's remarks, and when they arrived home, seemed anxious to get her to her room, retiring herself almost immediately.

Mara took off the mysterious rubies with a feeling of relief, and hastily taking off her ball robe, went to her bedroom. Sleep soon overcame her imaginings.

When all was still, about two hours after, the door leading from the dressing-room on to a balcony, was stealthily opened, and a

man, muffled up in a cloak, stepped into the room. Gazing curiously around, he spied the rubies which, in her weary disgust, Mara had left carelessly on the table. Anxiously, but eagerly, the muffled figure stepped towards them and examined them intently. Then, carefully replacing them, departed as he came.

A strange burglar, in troth, to leave those priceless jewels behind him.

What could it mean! Surely, there was a secret attaching to those mysterious rubies. And the fact that the face that bent over the gems was that of the brother of the young girl who had appeared so astonished by the first sight of the rubies, made it still more mysterious.

The next day Mara implored her friend to tell her the secret and the manner in which she herself became the possessor of the ornament, feeling assured she could in some way give an explanation.

Miss Wentworth seemed very confused and alarmed, but answered—

“The jewels are mine, as I told you be-

fore ; I bought them, and I give them to you. Why should you doubt me, dear ? ”

“ Doubt you, I do not. But why should they attract such notice, such curious interest from those people ? ”

“ Mara, Mara, they are mine. I have had them for years ; and I paid a great price for them. Oh ! in truth, I bought them ! ”—an expression of the keenest agony flitting over her face.

“ Forgive me, but,” and the young face flushed deeply, “ you told me last night you bought them the other day.”

Miss Wentworth turned pale—

“ You confuse me so, Mara, I make mistakes. Why should you doubt me ? ”

“ I suspect you ? who owe you all,” cried Mara, clinging to and kissing her friend’s troubled face.

“ You may give them to me to keep for you, till you care to wear them again.”

“ I will, thank you, but I feel as though they would burn me, or something, if I wear them again ; ” she laughed nervously.

“Now go for a walk, dear. I will have tea ready when you return.”

Mara kissed her and went, by no means satisfied.

Left alone, Miss Wentworth leant her head on her hands, and sobbed—

“I bought them. But, oh, that the price had never been paid.”

Some days after Mara was in a shop, making a little purchase, as a present for Miss Wentworth, when the two ladies previously named entered the shop; not perceiving Mara, they took seats some little distance from her.

Furtively Mara regarded them. They were evidently ladies of some quality; their bearing was refined, and perfectly graceful; their voices low toned, but clear as silver bells; the elder lady must have been very lovely in her youth, after a calm, classical beauty; but the girl's face was lively and sweet, her smile engaging, her eyes keen and brilliant.

Mara was lost in interest, as she gazed on them; suddenly the girl's quick eyes espied

her, but, save for a penetrating glance and a flush on her delicate cheek, she gave no sign of having recognised Mara; but presently she whispered a few words to her mother, who turned her stately head for a slight glance.

On leaving the shop they entered a luxurious carriage, in which sat the young man, their companion at the ball; as they drove away, ensconced in their furs and wraps, Mara gave a little sigh, half of envy, half of interested curiosity.

After finishing her shopping she attended the morning service in a church that was near. Tired with her walk she was sitting listening with rapt attention to the beautiful anthem, when, turning her head, she saw standing near a pillar the strange gentleman, intently regarding her; she dropped her eyes, an expression of displeasure stealing over her face, and he, with flushed countenance, hastily bent his gaze on the book he held.

As Mara was passing through the gloomy porch-door, she dropped her handkerchief, and the stranger, who was following her,

picked it up, and gave it her, with a courteous bow.

Mara blushed, feeling vexed and annoyed, and, with a hasty word of thanks, walked quickly away, wishing with her whole heart she had never seen the mysterious ornaments.





CHAPTER III.

WE will now go to a stately mansion, about four miles from Hayfield. It is evening time, and we will enter the stately hall, with its soft rugs and stands of hot-house flowers, pictures of courtly dames, and grand soldier-like men; pass up the low, wide oaken staircase, with its carpet of crimson hue, and enter a large, cosily-furnished, daintily ornamented drawing-room. Before a bright fire, in a low, easy chair, sits the grey-eyed lady, robed in black silk, an exquisite lace cap on her fair tresses; she is playing with a long screen of ostrich feathers, and dreamily listening to the soft strains evoked by her daughter's skilful touch from a grand piano.

The young girl wears an evening dress of

soft, white material; the brown hue of her flowing curls, and the intense blue of her eyes, enabling her to dispense with any colour. She appears excited and expectant, and, ever and anon, stops to listen; but the wind sobbing up the leafless avenue effectually prevents any sound reaching the inmates of the room.

At last she abruptly quits the piano, and kneels down before the glowing fire—

“Rudolph is long in coming, mamma.”

The lady smiles and sighs; smiles, for she cannot comprehend her young daughter's eager, excitable disposition; sighs, for the ethereal beauty of her face awakens thoughts of her dead husband, dead for six long years.

“He will be here anon, Alison; go and play again; play the ‘Land of the Leal,’ dearest.”

The girl obeys, and, as the full, rich, vibrating tones ring out, her mother drops her face on the plummy screen, to hide her thickly gathering tears. But, scarcely have the sad strains died away, and with all the quickness of her variable, impulsive temperament, she dashes into a brilliant valse, then suddenly the door is thrown open, and

Rudolph L'Estrange, for such is his name, enters.

Alison springs up from the piano, and hastens towards him—

"What news," she exclaims; "Rudolph, have you seen her again?"

"Yes, Nelsie, but I felt myself anything but gentlemanly, I can assure you; when she looked so dignified and haughty under what she considered my impertinent scrutiny. But, coming out of the church, fortune favoured me. She dropped her handkerchief; I picked it up, and returned it; her name was on it, 'Mara Heath.'"

Alison's eyes sparkled eagerly. Lady L'Estrange calmly remarked—

"It is a satisfaction to know her name."

Sir Rudolph flung himself into a low seat ere he asked—

"What course do you intend pursuing, mother mine?"

His mother opened her placid orbs widely as she replied—

"What can I do?"

"But the rubies, mamma," cried Alison;

“the rubies that exactly match the coronet you have.”

“There could hardly be a second set exactly like that one, of such splendid gems,” remarked Rudolph, slowly.

“No,” cried his sister, “and you are so slow over it. Why, you and mamma do not seem half so interested as I. I only fear that she may prove beneath our station in life.”

Rudolph, who partook largely of his mother’s calm nature, looked in laughing wonder at his sister’s eagerness.

Lady L’Estrange said quietly—

“It is a great responsibility on me.”

After some minutes’ silence, Alison cried quickly—

“Mara ! Why, in the picture gallery, there is a Mara L’Estrange.”

Her hearers looked startled, and Rudolph rose, saying—

“Come, Nelsie, let us go and see.”

Taking a small lamp, the brother and sister went to the long, dreary gallery, with the wind souging in the elm trees, whose branches swept the large windows.

Alison led the way, till she paused before a large picture. Holding the lamp on high, Rudolph quietly examined the likeness. It represented a dark-faced lady, not far from thirty years of age, with ebon hair, arranged in long, full curls; a coronet of rubies gleamed over her brow. Something in the face reminded one of Mara Heath; something in the full, crimson lips, in the dark eyes, and olive, tinted complexion.

This Rudolph noticed, for he exclaimed—

“Why, Nelsie, ’tis like Mara Heath.”

“And here is the name Mara,” she replied, pointing to a brass label; and she added, excitedly, “Rudolph look, those rubies are the same as in mamma’s coronet; of course, they were hereditary jewels.”

Returning to the drawing-room, they related their discovery to their mother, whose fair face flushed, and whose eyes, for once, grew as eager as Alison’s.

“Something must be done. Can you not suggest in what way, Rudolph?” she said slowly.

Some weeks rolled by, winter was creeping on apace. Mara, in walking one day, met

the brother and sister on horseback. They merely gave her a courteous glance as they cantered by at a pace. Mara, soon after, was introduced to Rudolph, and found him a very agreeable gentlemanly man, and his quiet attentions nearly lulled the fears of a disastrous secret connected with her to rest.

She knew now that they were the family at the Grange, and shall we confess she often thought of Rudolph's kindly face in the dull autumn days.

One morning, as she was sitting reading in her room, Miss Wentworth entered, and said, with a face pale with intense excitement—

“Mara, Mara, Lady L'Estrange has called to see you.”

“To see me?” said the girl, amazed, pleased and fluttered.

“Yes, go down quickly.”

“But my dress, this plain black dress?”

“Never mind,” and tenderly, but hastily, she smoothed her young *protégé's* wavy locks; then folding her in a warm embrace, she murmured, half in tears—

“*Ruby*, love me always.”

Perplexed, Mara went down into the drawing-room, feeling, as she entered it, pleased that it had so refined an appearance.

Lady L'Estrange rose from her chair near the window, and looked intently at the advancing girl. Mara shyly said—

“Lady L'Estrange, I believe?”

“Yes, I came to see you, my dear; I have certain reasons that induced me to make myself known to you.”

Then ensued a long conversation, during which Lady L'Estrange, with admirable tact and courtesy, drew from Mara a complete category of her past life, pursuits, studies, &c., which made her wonder at the interest her visitor appeared to take in her.

At length Lady L'Estrange wished her to sing. Mara acquiesced, and her voice, so full and sweet, rang in the pathetic ballad of “Auld Robin Gray.”

Meanwhile, her new friend critically noticed the tones of her voice, face, and figure, and formed favourable opinions.

When Mara had finished her song, she found Lady L'Estrange standing by her side,

with tears in her liquid eyes, who, gently kissing her, murmured—

“We shall be friends, I know.”

When at last she departed, after having made Mara promise to dine with her the next evening, Mara, full of wonder and pleasure, ran upstairs seeking Miss Wentworth, who answered with broken voice within her closed door—

“Not now, my darling ; leave me a little while.”

On the eventful evening, Miss Wentworth assisted Mara to dress, choosing for her her black silk, and arranging, with skilful hands, her deep lace collar and cuffs, fastening a bow of ruby-coloured satin at her throat.

“Good-bye, my darling,” she whispered lovingly, and the excited girl ran quickly downstairs, and was soon on her way to the Grange, seated in the comfortable carriage her new-found friend had sent for her. Feeling somewhat shy and nervous, Mara alighted at the hall door, Rudolph advancing to meet her as she entered.

The large, wide hall, with the antlers and

curiosities about it, the roaring log fire and cosy carved chairs, pleased Mara much. Rudolph, opening the drawing-room door, ushered her into the presence of his mother and sister.

In spite of a certain nervous trepidation, Mara bore herself with dignity and grace. Lady L'Estrange welcomed her kindly, and introduced her to Alison, who, with a bright smile, greeted her with suppressed excitement. Soon they descended to dinner; over the drawing-room mantel-piece hung the late Sir Rudolph's picture, his bright face, gay bearing and curling hair being the very counterpart of Nelsie's. But over the sideboard hung a picture that interested Mara still more—the picture of a graceful man in the prime of life, with soft blue eyes and rippling dark locks. This was the likeness (so Alison told her) of the late Baronet's cousin, Maurice L'Estrange. There was something at once sweet and melancholy in his aspect. On the opposite side of the room hung the portrait of his younger brother, George, a handsome, cynical-faced man, with something keen and forbidding in his large dark-grey eyes.

"Papa succeeded his cousin George, Maurice dying before his father," said Alison, looking in a curious way at Mara.

After dinner the ladies returned to the drawing-room, and Mara there submitted to a sort of polite cross-examination from the mother and daughter; the mother seemed to want to know about herself, while Alison appeared anxious to examine into her history.

Then, at their request, she sung to them, and afterwards Rudolph joined them. On the whole, Mara spent a very pleasant evening.

When she reached home again, Miss Wentworth was sitting up for her; her face was pale, and the marks of violent tears were round her eyes.

"I've had such a delightful evening," began Mara, but her companion hastily enquired if "Lady L'Estrange had told her anything?"

"No, but she sent you this note."

Taking it eagerly, Miss Wentworth perused it earnestly.

"Thank Heaven!" she muttered, "she has left it to me."



“What is it?” asked Mara, anxiously.

“To-morrow, dearest, I will tell you all.”

The next morning, after a silent breakfast, Mara nestled at Miss Wentworth’s feet, and said coaxingly, patting her worn hand lovingly—

“Now, dear, tell me all.”

Miss Wentworth (whose white face bore the marks of a sleepless night) drew from her pocket the ruby casket.

“The secret Mara, as you may have guessed, is connected with these sparkling gems.”

Then, suddenly, she let the jewels slip from her thin fingers, and covering her face with her hands uttered a very bitter cry—

“Mara, Mara, my own dear child, you promised to love me always.”

“And I mean to keep the promise, dear Miss Wentworth,” said Mara, looking up with great, startled eyes.

With an effort, Miss Wentworth resumed her explanations.

“I am the daughter of a surgeon with a

moderate practice, who dwelt at a small country town near here. My mother died when I was very young, and I and a younger sister were the only children of my dear parents. I was four years older than my sister, and in our lonely childhood I was ever her protectress and guide.

“As we grew up, she was very beautiful, gay and merry-hearted. Her style was yours, Mara, save that she was gay and you are serious. She had also more colour, more vivacity. I was—but you can, perhaps, imagine what I was with brown hair, dark eyes, and quiet, reserved ways. I loved my sister devotedly, but was apt to feel jealous of her winning powers and superior beauty.

“Well, when I was twenty-two, I made the acquaintance of Maurice L'Estrange, who soon won my heart, but when he saw my sister, he thought no more of me; all his attentions were turned to her, he loved her passionately, and at last married her against his father's will, and was cast off by the proud old man, who as the estate was entailed, could not disinherit him. But when



their child was a few months old, Maurice was killed suddenly by a carriage accident, and in a few more weeks, my poor sister Annabel, died too, broken-hearted. My poor father died soon after, and the news of his son's death killed the feeble old Sir George, who had repented of his hardness to his son. But I (here she drew her breath in labouring sobs), who had never forgiven my one time suitor for his defalcation, and who had been wickedly envious of my young sister, I now tell you; to be brief, George L'Estrange came to me, told me his father was dead, and he the heir to all the wealth and estate provided Maurice's child were unheard of, bribed me to take it away, and I, in my bitter revengeful spirit, yielded. The rubies were my reward, I took them to be a fortune to the child I so cruelly wronged.

"I kept the child until it was four years old, and, though it wrung my heart (for strange as it may seem, I loved it), put it then away. You know the rest. This is your mother's photograph, this your father's. These rubies are yours, you are my sister's



child, and Maurice L'Estrange's heiress. You are the lawful possessor of The Grange; you are Ruby L'Estrange; it was your young mother's fancy to call you by that strange bright name."

Here the excited woman paused, Mara's face was deathly white; her feelings and thoughts were strange and new to her; the "Ruby L'Estrange," a member of that proud family, one of the elder branch! Her mother, Miss Wentworth's sister, her father, Maurice L'Estrange, and the woman she had loved and revered so much, so guilty, so false.

"Pity me Ruby! I have suffered, aye! God knows the weary, weary years I've passed. George L'Estrange died when you were seven years old, and his cousin Rudolph came to The Grange, and though I had repented so bitterly, who would believe me were I to present myself and say, 'This child is your cousin's heiress.' I have suffered Ruby, but I had you here, I gave you the rubies, but Alison L'Estrange recognised them; the dreaded moment has come; you know all!

“It seems George repented of his crime, his betrothed died, and in his desk, in a secret drawer, he left for his cousin Rudolph a record of all, praying him to find you. The proud man could not bring himself to confess his crime while living. But Rudolph did not discover it till just before his death of consumption in a foreign land; and then he left it as a sacred duty to his wife and children. Being almost broken-hearted, poor Lady L'Estrange did not note it for some time, but on her return to England, three years ago, she made enquiries, but secretly, for the honour of the family. They only returned to live at The Grange this autumn. This is what Lady L'Estrange told me, and she and her children are willing to reinstate you. It appears Alison, who is very like her father, takes a lively interest in this tale, and in you; and her excitable nature caused the amazement with which she beheld the rubies. Now you know all; and thank God, the mystery is at an end.”

Poor Mara murmured—

“I am so glad, my name is not ‘Bitter-

ness," and then burst into a passion of hysterical tears.

"Ruby, you will hate me now!"

"No, dear aunt, you are the one to whom I owe my all! But I must think of it," and she sought the solitude of her own room.

Late that afternoon, Miss Wentworth sat waiting for Ruby, as we must now call her. Tea was ready, and the fire burned brightly, but in the poor woman's heart beat a fire of torturing thoughts. Would Mara hate her? But soon the door opened slowly, and with a face white and weary, bearing evidence of her conflict, Ruby came in. Quietly crossing the room, she knelt down by Miss Wentworth's arm-chair, and kissing her cheek, murmured—

"My dear Aunt Caroline!"

With a burst of tears, Caroline Wentworth cowered down, hiding her face in her hands.

"Ruby, my darling, you heap coals of fire on my head." Then raising her head, with a look of earnest appeal in her eyes, she asked—

"Can you forgive me, Ruby?"

"I have forgiven you," said Ruby sweetly ;
"for you have suffered much."



After tea she sat as usual at her aunt's feet, in her hands the likeness of her fair, blithe, dark-eyed mother.

“ Oh, dear aunt, I am so glad I know the history of my parents at last, and that I am Ruby L'Estrange, not Mara Heath.”





CHAPTER IV.



FEW days after the foregoing conversation, Ruby's new-found relations called to see her for a prolonged visit.

After some persuasion, for she was unwilling to leave poor Miss Wentworth, Ruby yielded, and returned to The Grange with them.

That evening a long conversation took place over Ruby's strange history; explanations and information were given. Rudolph told her of his burglarious visit on the night of the ball. Their interest had been excited, and at his sister's earnest desire he followed their carriage home, and then, waiting until all was quiet, ascended the balcony steps, and seeing through the glass door the rubies were

on the table, entered and examined them, after which exploit his mother resolved to call on Miss Wentworth, when the result of the interview was she confessed all to Lady L'Estrange, who afterwards asked Ruby to her house, wishing to see what sort of girl she was before making known to her the truth.

From motives of charity she left the poor misguided woman to tell her beloved Mara the secret.

Alison's somewhat critical taste was perfectly satisfied with her new-found cousin, and she soon lavished on her all the affection of a warm heart, and Ruby's grave nature profited by association with her mercurial cousin.

After Christmas had passed Ruby would have returned home, but Miss Wentworth seemed so determined for her to stay with her new relations that she again yielded the point, and accompanied the L'Estranges on a round of visits to several country houses.

Then came the London season, and Lady L'Estrange presented Ruby and Alison at a

drawing-room. Both girls so beautiful, yet so widely contrasted, made a great impression in the fashionable circles.

Ruby's romantic history soon became known, and she was one of the belles of the season, and though often nervous, Alison's blithe society and perfect self-possession nerved also her diffident cousin.

Before the season was quite over, Alison, who was far from strong, became weary of the incessant gaiety, and so they returned home to The Grange.

Then came the decision Ruby was called upon to make, whether she would stay with her congenial friends or return to Miss Wentworth's society; she had persistently refused to take The Grange, but desired that some compromise in the division of property should take place, which was not yet decided upon, her relations wishing to give her all her due.

Ruby found her old benefactress so weak and ailing, that after a struggle with her feelings and inclinations, she, to the grief of her friends, returned to Miss Wentworth.

She was amply rewarded for her sacrifice by the look of peace on her aunt's pale face as her wronged, but dearly-cherished niece, again took her place by her fireside.

The L'Estranges went to travel on the Continent, and Ruby once more resumed her quiet duties and uneventful life she had led as "Mara Heath."

But as the heat of the summer grew stronger, her aunt became so weak and ill that Ruby decided to take her to the sea-side.

It was a lovely place, with scented pines, bijou-like houses, and yellow sands. Never before had Ruby seen the rolling waves of the eternal sea; and long hours spent she by the murmuring waves, as the summer days grew into tinted autumn.

Her aunt grew weaker; and when the leaves were lying on the ground, Ruby knew her days were numbered.

Gloomy were the hours now. Poor Miss Wentworth cared for nought but to lie on the sofa, her sad eyes fixed on the restless, moaning waves; and Ruby, whose heart

sorrowed for her aunt's trials, and whose loving eyes saw the misery without the sin, whose own nature, though purer and nobler than her aunt's, yet was something akin to it, in her passionate love and grave reserve; sorrowed for the fast approaching day which should see her mother's sister at rest.

But Caroline Wentworth was fain to go; her life had been very drear. Unlike the prompter of her crime, she had lingered on into full middle age, with the weight of remorse ever crushing her life down to the ground.

And George L'Estrange—he, too, had suffered. The fair girl, his betrothed wife, whom he had loved with all his passionate, wayward heart, had died; and for three drear years he had dragged on his broken-hearted existence, the advancing terrors of remorse ever growing on his soul for his treachery to the child of his once loved ever loving brother, the blithe, somewhat weak Maurice.

Too proud to bear disgrace while living, he had one winter's eve, with trembling hands written his confession, and then, with weary



eyes, laid him down to die, without one loving hand to wipe the death-dews from his brow.

One afternoon, early in winter, when the red sun was dipping into the moaning sea, Ruby's aunt died, her hand in hers, and her voice whispering comfort to her weary mind.

With aching, desolate heart, Ruby closed the long fringed lids, and folded the thin hands. Then kneeling down by the couch, she burst into heartwrung tears.

That evening Ruby was sitting in the desolate parlour, a sort of superstitious terror freezing her veins. Oh, would that her kind relatives were with her! Oh, Rudolph, Rudolph!

"A lady to see you, ma'am." And she can scarce believe her eyesight when she sees the fair matronly face of Lady L'Estrange.

She rushes towards her, and is gathered in those kind arms.

"My poor child, my Ruby! We only returned yesterday; but I came on hearing your aunt was ill—and she is dead!"

When somewhat calmer, Ruby takes her to

see her poor dead aunt. And as Lady L'Estrange stood by the death-bed and looked on the worn face, now so calm, she stooped and kissed the wrinkled brow.

"I could scarcely forgive her living, but dead—poor thing, she did suffer."

After the funeral the two ladies remained a week or two before returning home.

One wet evening they arrived at The Grange. Rudolph, with delighted face, had met them at the station.

Alison, robed in slight mourning, met them in the hall, and as she clung to Ruby's arm, murmured tenderly—

"You belong to us alone now, dear cousin Ruby."





CHAPTER V.

EARLY in the next autumn, Ruby, one morning, was sitting in the library musing, not unhappily, her eyes watching the rooks whirling in the sunshiny air around the tops of the golden-red trees. Her sorrow for her aunt had subsided into a melancholy, resigned peaceful thankfulness, that the weary soul was at peace at last.

Rudolph entered, and, approaching her, sits down in the wide window-sill beside her. Ruby blushes a little, and resumes her reading, but his hand is gently laid over the page, and he asks—

“Ruby, will you fulfil my mother’s fondest wish, Alison’s hope, and my earnest petition? Will you give me the keeping of our bright jewel, our Ruby?”

And Ruby, though the rendering is some-

what florid, knows the solid worth beneath, and answers simply—

“Yes.”

“Oh, Ruby, mine own,” he murmurs, “what blessed rubies those were which made you known to us.”

The marriage was fixed for the early spring, and when the time came, numerous guests were asked to be present at the festivities.

The night before her wedding day, Ruby wore the priceless gems ; but, in the midst of the gay scene, she stole away for a moment’s quiet musing. Presently two ladies entered the room, behind the folding doors of which Ruby was leaning against a pillar.

“The motive for the marriage is plain ; all can see it ; Lady L’Estrange is deep, if quiet ; she wishes to keep the property in her family, and by her son marrying the girl, all difficulties are smoothed away.”

“And the girl, it is a good match for her, reared as she has been,” said one.

“Yes,” was the reply, “you are right. He wants her money, she his title.”

Poor Ruby slips away up to her own room.

“Is that what people think ? Oh no, ’tis

not true; Rudolph is honourable," but she will never let any one imagine she marries him for his title; no, her proud spirit shrinks from the very thought, and, wounded to the quick, she resolves to fly! They should not misjudge her so, she would not wrong Rudolph by letting strangers think his wife did not love him!

Writing a note, she hides it in her jewel drawer, and, taking off her gala dress, she hastily attired herself in a walking dress, and, placing the jewels in the casket, opens the French window, and flies away into the rainy night, "Mara again, her soul all bitterness and grief."

Who can describe the sorrow and consternation that ensued on the discovery of Mara's flight. Rudolph was alarmed; Alison eagerly searched her room, and at last discovered the note. She ran with it to her brother, who read as follows:—

"MM EVER DEAR RUDOLPH,—

"I fear our marriage would not be for our happiness, so I leave you. Do not

seek to find me; but be happy. I am not ungrateful to your dear mother, and my heart bleeds to leave Nelsie, but 'tis for the best."

"Mother, what can it mean?"

Lady L'Estrange shook her head helplessly.

"I cannot tell; I fear we have been deceived in her."

"Never!" cried Rudolph, almost fiercely, while Alison, crying bitterly, sobbed—

"Oh, Ruby, Ruby, where are you gone?"

"We must search for her," cried Rudolph, a look of hope crossing his face, "she cannot be gone far."

But though the search began that night, was prosecuted for weeks, the weeks deepened into months, and no "Ruby" was found.

At last Lady L'Estrange grew angry; the girl must be false. Alison also gave up her faith, and lamented sorely for her brother's trouble. He never gave up, but searched far and near, till an illness, brought on by fatigue and grief, prostrated him.



CHAPTER VI.

IT is Christmas Eve, in a dreary room in a small lodging-house, lies a girl on the sofa by a small fire. Her face is white, and wan her eyes with weeping—'tis Ruby! What has she done during all those weary months since her mistaken flight from The Grange? At first she went to the seaside town her aunt had died at; but one afternoon she saw Rudolph, and that night she fled to London by the last train. There, under the assumed name of "Mary Jones," she earned a precarious livelihood by her drawings and needle-work. Long since she had seen how foolish she had been, but false shame prevents her going back.

But her heart is sad, when will her exile end? She is weak and ill, and 'tis Christmas

Eve. Indeed, she has been nearly at death's door; her savings are gone, her rent unpaid, and her landlady's charity is worn, and, after Christmas-time is passed, she tells her she must go.

What shall she do? Moving from the sofa, she crouches over the small fire, her tears falling fast. Oh, that in her mistaken and false pride she had never fled from her kind relations; she fears Lady L'Estrange will never forgive her, even if she would go back, for she is proud, though gentle.

And Rudolph, what misery she has brought on him! But perhaps he thinks her false, and has cast her from his heart! And then the thought that if she had but conquered her bitter resenting pride, she would now be the centre of a happy family party at the dear old Grange, causes her to bow her head on her hands and cry—

“Rudolph, my darling.”

Was she dreaming or mad, for surely she heard his voice saying, “Ruby! Ruby!” She looks round, and then springs to her feet. She must be mad, for there, she thinks,

stands Rudolph, his hands outstretched, his eyes full of love.

“Rudolph, is it you?” she whispers, and then faints away.

When her senses returned, Rudolph’s own true face was bending over her.

“If I am dreaming,” she murmurs vaguely, “let me still dream on.”

But he stoops and kisses her.

“It is no dream, dear Ruby; I am here, I have found my treasure at last,” and a great tear falls on her upturned face. In glad amazement she clings to him.

“Have you sought me all this time?”

“Not quite all, for I was ill part of the time.”

“Oh, forgive me,” she cries.

“Freely; why, silly child, did you flee?” And then she told him all.

“Now tell me how you heard of me.”

“Why, Ruby, we are all staying in London, and I, wandering about, thinking of my lost jewel, saw you in a picture shop. I entered after you had left, gained your address, and came here, and in ‘Mary Jones,’” he

added, with a smile, "I found my 'Ruby L'Estrange.'"

"And you never doubted me?"

"Never, dear one, though I could not fathom your motive."

"But your mother, Rudolph," she asked, after a while, "she will never forgive me."

"She has been vexed with you, I confess, but in this blessed Christmas-time she has forgiven you quite. She and Alison are with me; Nelsie is very delicate."

"I am sorry," cried Ruby, with tears in her eyes."

"It is consumption, we fear," he said, with a quiver in his voice.

Before a comfortable fire, in a small but pretty room, sat Rudolph's mother, sadly thinking. "All her bright hopes seemed destined to be broken;" Ruby lost, her son miserable, and cherished Nelsie ill. The mother's heart could not bear the thought that, like her father, her sweet child would, perchance, die.

Alison, wrapped up in a warm, white shawl, lay on a couch, her eyes fixed



dreamily on the fire. She was altered, her face was thinner, and her colour carmine, while her eyes seemed larger and bluer than ever. Her mother's heart ached to see how thin and transparent the hand which supported the curly head was.

"I have been thinking," said Alison waking suddenly out of her reverie, and turning her brilliant eyes on her mother's face, "of Ruby. Would you forgive her if she came back?"

"Yes, dear child. I feel sure we shall find her soon. I think you and I have misjudged her."

"Mamma, dear, Rudolph has firm faith in her."

Before her mother could reply, Rudolph entered, a light in his eyes that spoke of good news.

Alison sprang off the sofa, her old energy returning for the time.

"You have found her, dear Rudolph?"

"Yes, thank God." And he sank into a chair, covering his face to conceal his emotion.

His young sister sat down by his side.

"Oh, brother, dear, I am so happy! How did you find her?"

After a little explanation, Rudolph looked wistfully at his mother.

"Dearest mother, you will receive her again?"

"She has been very foolish, and caused you untold suffering," she replied.

Alison went to her, and, putting her arm round her neck, whispered—

"For my sake, dear mother."

And then Lady L'Estrange answered with tears—

"I will forgive her." Then rising, she added, "I will go and fetch her now."

But her son stopped her—

"Not now; to-morrow, for she is very weak and ill."

How happy that Christmas Eve was to Ruby, though she did not know how her relative would receive her.

Yet, as she heard the joyous clang of bells, ringing in the Christmas morn, she felt a soft glow of good tidings enter her heart.

“Peace on earth, good-will to men.” How could she doubt a welcome home?

After church that morning, Lady L'Estrange drove to Ruby's lodging.

She found her waiting, with flushed brow and anxious-looking eyes, in her dreary room. But one kind glance from that gentle face, she ran towards her, and was clasped to that motherly heart.

“Poor child, I would have been a mother to you; how could you doubt us so?”

For some time Ruby could only sob out the fulness of her restful joy, but afterwards she said, with drooping eyes—

“I do not deserve your pardon, but my early life has made me over sensitive and given to distrustful feelings—I am wiser now.”

And her friend, looking at her pale face, said—

“Dear girl, you have punished yourself most. When will you cease to be ‘Mara?’”

“I will try to be ‘Ruby’ henceforth,” she cried, smiling.

Then Lady L'Estrange spoke in trembling tones, holding Ruby's hand—

“Never leave us again, dear child; be a daughter to me, for I greatly fear my own Alison is not long to be spared me.”

And when Ruby witnessed the excited tears and trembling joy with which Alison greeted her she feared so too, and bitterly regretted having forsaken them all so long.

Ah, the blessed peace of that tranquil day; the joy of reunion with her mother-friend, her adopted sister, and her dear Rudolph!





CHAPTER VII.

AFTER Christmas they remained some time in London, while repairs and re-furnishing of rooms took place at the old Grange.

Early in the spring they returned home, and preparations for the wedding were again engaged in.

One beautiful day in May the marriage took place, a select company of friends being present.

Ruby had five bridesmaids, all very pretty, clad in soft blue and white. The head bridesmaid attracted much pitying admiration, for the fair young face, so brilliant in its tints, spoke of an early grave, which all could plainly see, except poor Nelsie herself.

Ruby looked very happy and very hand-

some in her bridal, shiny satin; but what many present thought strange was that, instead of pearls or diamonds, she wore flashing gems of ruddy hue.

But those rubies were very precious to the bride, as the heralds of her good fortune and happiness!

The wedding tour was but short for Alison's sake, and it comprised a fleeting visit to the same sea-side place where Miss Wentworth died.

Ruby knelt once more by the stone cross, on which was engraved—"In memory of Caroline Wentworth, who died, Nov. 19th, 18—, aged 48 years; with Him is forgiveness of sins," the words chosen by the poor woman herself.

As Ruby arose and looked over the sea, dancing in the golden sunlight of the fair, fresh morn, she felt, indeed, as though "Bitterness" were put away for ever.

She paid a visit to the Brodwells, and found them much the same as of old, save that Minna was married, and Mrs. Brodwell softer in face and quieter in mien. For

Mara's gentle parting with her had borne its fruit, and now, though she could scarce find "Mara Heath" in the tall, stately "Lady Ruby," she felt pleased and flattered at her call, and Mr. Brodwell was very glad to see her.

Ere she left, Ruby carried a lovely wreath of white camellias to little Herbie's grave, and softly told Rudolph of the dear little child whose love had cheered her early life, and whose death had been her first great grief.

And then, save for a kindly remembrance, Ruby put aside her life as Mara, and turned home to The Grange with glad heart.

It is an autumn day, fresh and breezy; the sun is sinking in grey and purple-red glory. The leafless trees are bending before the rough wind.

But the out-door scene only makes the comfort of the room wherein Alison is seated, before the cheery fire, more bright.

In the bay window stands Ruby, looking bright and sweet. The perfect happiness of her present life has drawn out concealed qualities of gaiety and winning affability, and

in all the country round there is none more popular than the young Lady L'Estrange, Sir Rudolph's cherished wife.

But Alison's face still speaks of failing health and spirits. Presently she calls her sister to her side. Lovingly Ruby twines her arm round her, looking into the blue orbs anxiously.

Alison drops her head on Ruby's shoulder. Twisting her thin fingers in the chain the other wears, she says huskily—

“Ruby, I feel at last, that I am dying. Don't shrink away; I have fought against it long, and life is very sweet; but at last I feel it. You know I have refused to go abroad, for I know it would be useless, and I remember how my dear father sighed for home in his last days. Ruby, you will be—you are—a daughter to my mother, and cheer her in her grief. I cannot bear to think of it, we have always been so happy together!” And her tears fell fast.

Ruby's sobs choked her speech. Rudolph came in and looked startled at the weeping girls.

"Why Nelsie," he said; striving to speak playfully, "you have been making my little wife cry. What shall I do to you?"

But Alison held out her hand, saying, with a sweet smile—

"Come here, Rudolph. Tell Ruby she must not cry, for she must comfort my mother and you, when soon I sleep beneath the green turf in our dear little churchyard."

Early the next spring, when the snowdrops were peeping from the ground, the end came. One morning Alison lay on the sofa, in her room, the ruddy fire-light reflecting on her white shawl, and casting a warm glow on her cheek, on which the treacherous bloom of consumption was. Presently she said—

"Ruby, put down your work, and go for a walk; it is a lovely day, so fresh, and such a glorious sunshine; just one of those days I used to glory in. How long ago it seems, Ruby, since I rejoiced in my health and strength."

"Nay," answered the other, gently, "I will not leave you, Nelsie, for your dear mother is resting awhile, and I am quite well."

"Please bear, in my own name. I do not like to feel I keep people in, and you are looking pale."

Seeing how much she wished it, Ruby rose, and put aside her work, and went in dress for a walk. In a few minutes she returned, a rich, warm scarlet gown around her tall figure.

"Ruby," said Nelsie, holding out her hands, as she bent over her to kiss her, "you know mamma has a picture of me; if she puts it in the gallery, hang it by the sunniest window, and tell them to have it brightened with flowers. Tell what you, Ruby; I can't bear to think of my likeness being in that gloomy place."

"I will, dear me. But, Nelsie, you are not so well, let me stay with you."

But she refused; and, in her sister saying she would only take the dirt in the evening, she looked up with one of her tall, winsome, wistful smiles, and said—

"But Ruby, I want some snowdrops from the far country; they must be sent by now."

And Ruby, with a painful smile in her

heart, kissed her bright face, Alison clinging to her with sudden emotion.

“God bless you, Ruby dear, for you will take my place; aye, and more than fill it; much better than poor, wilful Nelsie.”

With tears in her dark eyes, Ruby turned to go, looking back at the door for a last smile.

“Do not hurry, dear Ruby, I am quite happy alone,” were Nelsie’s last words.

And often, in after years, did the vision of that sweet happy face arise before her sister. Ruby hastened along, scarcely feeling the sunny, spring like air, only wishful of getting back to Alison; she found the snowdrops, also some primroses, and the sweet perfume of the early violets led her on to gather some for Alison.

Returning home she sought the sick room, and, going towards the couch, held out the flowers, with a smile; but, the smile faded, for the fire-light flickered on a wax-like face and motionless form.

With sinking heart, Ruby approached her. Alas, the mobile face would change no more;

the brown lashes rested on cheeks on which the lovely tints would glow no more; the sweet mouth was set in a peaceful smile—
“Poor Alison was dead.”

Half stunned, Ruby softly laid down the flowers on the small table, whereon lay Alison's little blue-covered Bible, and the work, in which the glistening needle she would ply no more still was.

Horried, and bitterly repenting of having left her, Ruby tottered from the room, and met Rudolph on the landing; he read the sad tidings in her face at once, and, white and weary, leaned against the door. Ruby, taking her part of comfort for the moment, went to her husband, and, taking his hand, cried—

“Our Nelsie is resting so fully and sweetly at last,” and then burst into tears, and sobbed in convulsive despair on his shoulder.

Who can describe the grief of the mother, when told her beloved child was dead, and her sorrow was intensified by the fact that she was absent at the time. And to Ruby and Rudolph, too, their sorrow appeared at

first unbearable ; Alison had always been so dear and loveable, although in earlier days somewhat wilful, partly from her airy, gay nature, partly from the indulgence she had always met with ; her mother's darling, her father's intelligent companion and sweet comforter, her brother's pet and plaything.

After the funeral the silence and gravity of the house grew too intense to be borne, for Alison had been the sunbeam of all, even through her illness. So they went abroad, and spent some time there, the elder Lady L'Estrange being so ill and low-spirited that her son and Ruby feared, at first, she would soon follow Alison ; but, after a time, she became better, and turned to Ruby, who had grown like a second daughter to her ; and, after Christmas, they returned once more to the old home.

Five years have come and gone since Alison died, and one sweet spring evening the L'Estrange family were assembled in a comfortable, luxuriously furnished sitting-room. Ruby and her husband are standing, arm clasped in arm, before the wide window,

gazing forth on the smoother level, with the great cedars and springing flowers. The somewhat sad peace of the spring evening has stolen into their hearts, driving away all worldly thoughts, and purifying their souls from earthly drags.

Ruby lies in a somewhat reposeful mood, looking over her past life, and tracing through all the changes and changes of her fortune, the Martin Hand that has guided her feet into the pleasant pastures she now walks in.

And Richard, he, too, is somewhat thoughtful—thoughts of his young sister filling his loving heart.

By the fire sits their mother, dressed in soft black silks, her now silvered hair lying in smooth locks under one of the beauty lace caps Ruby delights to make for her; her clear features are somewhat worn, and her face thinner, but her large grey eyes are smiling lovingly on the little rolling creature at her feet, who smiles up in her face with great violet eyes, as her own little daughter had done in years long past, and

who tumbles into her lap with a tiny shout of "Gan Ma."

Yes, "Little Ailie" fills, as far as mortal being can, the vacuum caused in that tender heart by the loss of the beloved Alison.

Presently Ruby advances to the fireside, and kneeling down, takes Ailie in her arms and kisses and plays with her, pleased to see the ever brightening smile on "Grandmamma's" face.

Rudolph draws near and looks on his dark-haired wife and little child, and long-loved mother.

It is a pretty tableau on which the firelight flickers. By-and-by, Ruby and Rudolph leave Lady L'Estrange singing the little one to sleep, and go to the gallery. There they walk up and down, while the shadows grow deeper, quietly talking over past events.

The gallery has been altered and brightened. Ruby daily tends the stand of blooming flowers; and in one window, where the early sunshine falls, is a comfortable chair and groups of the fairest flowers, where Alison's mother often comes and gazes on the picture

of her daughter, in the flush of her beauty, which hangs in that cosy niche.

Pausing before the window, the husband and wife watch the stars peep out, one by one, and Ruby, resting her head on Rudolph's arm, murmurs—

“Ah, dearest, how blessed has been my transition from ‘Bitterness’ to the happiest joy.”



1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100.



ROSABELLA.

CHAPTER I.

QNE lovely summer's afternoon a horseman was riding slowly through a country lane, the banks of which were crowded with sweet flowerets; the sun scarcely penetrated between the thickly leaved trees, whose dark green hue proclaimed the month of July. The rider was apparently about three or four-and-twenty; tall, alert, handsome, with dark complexion, and raven hair, which took an almost blue tint in the sunshine.

The splendid thoroughbred he rode stepped



slowly down the fragrant lane, the horseman seeming lost in dreamy enjoyment.

He aroused himself, however, as they turned on to a breezy, sunny down, and quickened his steed's pace into a canter. Leaving the down behind them, they passed through a small village, and reached the gate of an avenue leading to a house embowered in roses.

The building was long and somewhat low, with flowers creeping round the upper stories, while the lower windows opened on to a verdant stretch of velvety lawn. On the left-hand side, was a kind of projecting balcony, with steps at the end leading down into the garden, on which stood a young girl.

She wore a dress the hue of the summer leaves surrounding her; her complexion resembled the pink and white roses on either side of the balcony, her hair being of a softly-tinted yellow gold, as smooth and glossy as floss silk.

Very sweet, fresh, bright she looked as she stood in the sunlight, with the green leaves and red and white roses clambering around,

and the yellow jessamine waving above her head.

As the equestrian passed her she bent her head, whilst a smile like sunshine spread over her rosy face, curling the freshly-tinted lips, and lighting up the grave, brownish-grey eyes.

Descending the steps, she advanced towards him as he dismounted; holding out her hand, she said in a frank, bright tone—

“I feel sure you are Mr. Courtland, the Arnold of whom dear Bruce talks so much.”

“Yes, I am,” returned he, smiling. “And you?”

“Rosabella Thruxton,” she replied, with a gay laugh, “Bruce’s teasing sister.”

“How is your poor brother now?”

“Oh, very weak and dull; you must cheer him up. I will call the groom if you will wait a moment.”

As she was speeding past the open windows, a sharp voice called—

“Rosa, Rosa, where are you rushing to this hot afternoon? Come in directly.”

The girl paused, and approaching the window, said in a low voice—

“Aunt Marianne, Mr. Courtland has arrived.”

At these words a tall elderly lady, dressed in black silk, with keen grey eyes, and silvery hair neatly smoothed beneath her lace cap, approached the window.

Crossing the grass, she held out her hand to Arnold Courtland, giving him a cordial welcome.

An attendant having been summoned to take the horse, they entered the house by the French window.

The apartment was a pleasant dining-room, furnished in a handsome, neat manner, several good pictures adorning the walls; the fireplace was between the windows. Some lovely flowers were placed on a stand on the right hand side. On the opposite wall hung the portrait of a little girl, with bright hazel eyes, and golden curls.

Having partaken of some refreshment, Arnold requested to see Bruce.

Rosabella said she would acquaint her brother of his arrival, and quitted the room; in a few minutes Aunt Marianne and Arnold

followed her. The dining-room opened into a good-sized hall, paved with red and black marble, opposite the door a flight of low, varnished steps, carpeted with a bright colour, led upstairs ; on the left side a window of purple-hued glass threw long lines of vivid crimson and soft violet on the floor, flowers were placed about the hall in large china pots ; following his conductress up the low, broad stairs, Arnold found himself in a vestibule, covered with a warm, soft, brilliantly-tinted carpet, on to which several doors opened, and from which another flight of stairs led up to some more chambers. They entered a room in which a youth of some nineteen years lay on a couch placed before the open casement, through which a sprig of brier-roses waved. By the couch, on a low chair, with her back towards the window, was seated a girl, whose white flowing robe was flung into strong relief by the deep crimson of the carpet. Her large eyes of a most exquisite blue, were fixed on the ground, her face white and fragile-looking as the white rose in a vase beside her,



was raised as she leant slightly forward in an attitude of intense listening. Her hair, of a pale yellow, tinted with gold, fell in long smooth curls over her slight shoulders. The sun shone strongly on the bright head, its beams making a kind of halo around the pale face. This was Olive Thruxton, twin-sister to Rosabella. The latter stood by the side of her brother's couch, who was a handsome boy, with a delicate suffering face, blue eyes, and yellow curling hair. His face flushed with pleasure at sight of Arnold, who greeted him with tender warmth. It was a sad contrast, the one strong and manly-looking, the flush of youthful health on his cheek, the other so pale and languid-eyed, suffering from an injured knee. Turning from Bruce, after some minutes, Arnold's glance fell on a white, upturned face, with a pair of widely-opened, staring blue eyes. Seeing him look confused and astonished under the prolonged gaze, Rosabella came forward, and said in a low voice, tears in her soft orbs—

“Olive is blind!”

Poor Arnold felt astounded by a sense of

intense pity, sympathy, and a certain embarrassment. Blind ! blind ! Was it possible ? Poor girl ! poor Olive ! Blind !

Olive had risen, Rosabella twining one arm about her. Arnold glanced from her to Bruce, they had both the same exquisitely shaped and coloured eyes ; but what a difference in the two young faces, for one was illumined by the priceless gift of sight, while the other was blind ! The summer's sunshine, the flowers, the loving faces around her were unknown to Olive. She now said—

“ Mr. Courtland, you are confused at being presented so suddenly to a blind creature ; but you must not trouble to pity me ; I have never known what it is to see, therefore I cannot prize that inestimable boon as you. And Rosie is my sight,” she concluded, turning with a loving smile to her sister.

“ May I venture to express my sorrow and sympathy ? ” Arnold inquired hesitatingly.

“ Nay, I permit no one to pity me ; we shall be good friends, I hope, but you must not waste your compassion on one who refuses to accept it,” said she, brightly. She then

spoke in a low tone to her sister, who said—

“Oh, Mr. Courtland, would it be too much to ask, but Olive knows the faces of people by touch,” and she looked pleadingly at him; he lowered his handsome head immediately, and Olive’s snowy fingers swept his face with a gentle touch, she then smiled, as though well-satisfied, saying—

“Thank you, so very much; I longed to know what dear Bruce’s great friend was like.”

Bruce, Olive, and Rosabella Thruxton were the orphan children of a General Thruxton, who, many years before the time at which this tale commences, had purchased the house in which they lived. He had married a pretty gentlewoman, and for several years they enjoyed almost perfect felicity, their chief grief being Olive’s blindness. The two sisters had, in early childhood, acquired the pet names of the White and Red Roses, one being so fair and pale, the other so rosy and bright looking. They had another little girl, one year younger, very beautiful and lively; but, alas, when four years old, she had been stolen, as



it was supposed, by gipsies, and in spite of every means money and love could invent being taken to find her, little Ida was never seen again by her fond, agonised parents ; her portrait hung in the dining-room, and many and many a weary hour had the broken-hearted mother wept and prayed before the pictured semblance of her darling, offering up fervid yearning petitions that she might be restored to her home. In vain ! Never again was she to kiss the sparkling little face, or to smooth those rippling curls ! She devoted herself to her other children, loving them intensely, and as time went on, Olive became her mother's comforter, and Rosabella her father's sunbeam, while Bruce was their pride and joy.

But the loss of little Ida could never be made up to them, they never ceased to search for her, and a heavy shadow fell on the once bright home, which the children felt now and then in an awe-struck sorrow ; they mourned their sister a long while, but childhood's sorrow is not lasting, and when the parents, almost convinced that they would never see

her again, strove to keep their grief from the other little ones, they regained their childish glee. But often in after years would Olive and her mother talk together, in the twilight hour, of the dear lost one. When on Sabbath eves the children clustered round the piano, while the blind girl played with her wonderful skill, and Rosie and Bruce mingled their bright voices in a hymn of praise, the father and mother sitting apart, hand clasped in hand, felt their tears rise at the remembrance of the beaming hazel eyes. Mrs. Thruxton's health broke down under the wearing burden of bitter anxiety and sorrow, she became a confirmed invalid ; when nearly six years after Ida's disappearance, her husband died after a short illness, she followed him to the grave in four months. The broken heart was at rest, and in the Paradise above she awaits with her husband the arrival, one by one, of their children, and with the others the bright Ida, lost so long ago on earth.

Mr. Thruxton's sister, "Aunt Marianne," came to care for her poor little orphan nephew and nieces. She loved them very

dearly, and brought them up carefully and tenderly, though with some strictness. The girls were well taught by teachers at home, their brother going to a good school, which, at eighteen, he left, and joined a private tutor to prepare for college. But his bright prospects were ended by an injury to his knee, which he received from an accident during some athletic sports. During five long months he had been a prisoner on his couch. Having made Arnold's acquaintance at his tutor's, the latter, at his earnest petition, had come to see him.

Arnold Courtland was of a good family. His mother, who was a widow, lived in a lovely country place, while her son was preparing for the law.

On the evening of his arrival at Westbourne, he and Bruce watched from the open window the two sisters, who were strolling in the garden in the summer dusk. Olive's tall figure in the white dress moved firmly over the grass, her graceful walk and unhesitating step being wonderful in her blindness. Rosabella walked by her side, one arm

twined round her lithe form, her waving locks lifted by the sweet air, a soft red rose in her hand. They formed a pretty group, Rosabella so fresh and rosy-looking in her soft green robe, the circlet of gold round her neck glittering in the faint twilight; Olive so white, so still, so stately.

Once, as they paused beneath the window, Rosie looked up and smiled; her sister also raised her face, and Arnold was again startled and pained by the blind, upward gaze.

Later on in the evening, they were joined by the sisters. Olive sat at the dark, old harmonium in the room, playing soft airs and grand chants. Rosabella, with her hand in Bruce's, spoke to him now and then in a quiet undertone, while Arnold, seated by the wide window, watched the white figure at the instrument; the matchless hair, the statue-like face, the drooping eyelids and agile fingers.

It grew yet darker. "Aunt Marianne," who had joined them, was lulled to sleep. Olive was perfectly in the shade, except her

gleaming robe and hair, which the moonlight cast a silvery radiance over. Arnold thought of the sun that gilded her figure when he saw her first that afternoon. Was it emblematic? would the poor child, in her blindness, have yet some light always hovering on her sweet, contented life?

Presently she quitted the harmonium, and approached the window. Her face wore an abstracted kind of glory on it; her poor eyes were fixed on the blue sky and stars she would never see. Unable to bear the feeling of oppression that came over him, Arnold said gently—

“How beautifully you play, Miss Thruxton.”

She started and answered, with a little laugh, while a faint flush tinged her cheek—

“I had forgotton you, Mr. Courtland.”

The cessation of the music having awakened Miss Thruxton, they descended to the dining-room to supper. After that repast, Olive having gone to read to Bruce from her raised letter Bible, Rosabella and Arnold were left to entertain each other.

They talked for some time of Olive ; Rosa also told him of Ida's loss, for Bruce had seldom spoken to his friend of home, and so it was new to Arnold, who was much moved by the simple pathos of her recital of her much-loved sister's disappearance, and her parents' sad death.

"That is her portrait ; all we have of our little pet, save toys and little books."

"How very lovely ; what an exquisite face ! Do you remember her ?"

"Very faintly."

"And you never found a clue to her whereabouts ?"

"Never ! it broke my mother's heart, and my father's hair was nearly grey before he died, though he was still a young man."

When Olive bade Arnold good-night she said—

"I feel sure you are oppressed by my want of sight ; don't let it hurt you. I trust you will soon get used to me. I am very happy, am I not, Rosie ?"

"Very ; you are so contented, dearest."

"What is the matter with you, Rosie ?"

inquired Olive, detecting the sorrowful ring in the usually gay tone.

"I have been telling our friend of our old trial."

"Ah, yes," sighed Olive; "Ida, if she lives, is far more to be pitied than I, for she has never known the value of our parents' love."

Arnold's dreams that night were a mixture of yellow jessamine (of which a bouquet stood on his toilet table), blue, blind eyes and golden hair, and, mingled strangely with these, tender, grey orbs and rosy cheeks.

"Well, Olive, love, what do you think of him?" questioned Rosabella, as she combed her sister's long tresses.

"What do I think of him?" slowly replied Olive, "his voice is pleasant, and I should think he is very handsome. Does he look firm, as though one could depend upon him?"

"Oh, yes," laughed Rosa, "I like him very much; he is very kind to Bruce. Don't you like him, dear."

"I hardly know," was the answer, and yet,

shall we confess it, Olive dreamt that night of soft, deep-toned voices and pleasant words. When Rosabella had finished dressing Olive's curls, the latter mounted the old-fashioned chair before the mantel-shelf, and fervently kissed a portrait that hung there. It was an oil-painting of a very sweet-looking woman, of eight or nine-and-twenty, with white skin, blue eyes and pale golden hair arranged in long curls. This was Mrs. Thruxton. The blind girl had a custom of kissing the painted picture of her mother night and morning.

"How like our mother you are, dear Olive," said Rosabella, regarding the portrait with tearful eyes.

"Ah, she was not blind," sighed the other. Her sister gazed at her in amazement, for she was not wont to lament over her great misfortune.

"My poor darling," she cried, flinging her arms around her.

"Ah, Rosie, it *is* hard to be blind, after all."

Rosabella kissed her with silent tears.

"Have I made you cry, my darling?"

Olive asked, touching her wet cheek.

"Olive, what makes you so sad to-night?"

"I am very foolish, Rosie, but I should like to see the face of our friend."

"Oh!" laughed Rosabella, "that is it, is it? Poor dear, you have your clever fingers; did they not tell you what he looks like?"

"Yes, but we have so few guests. I like to be certain as to what they are like, to store my faces in my memory."

Rosabella glanced somewhat anxiously at the tender pale face, then kissed her tenderly, and striving to be gay, said—

"I will tell you. He is tall, and very bright-looking, his eyes are clear and dark, his mouth has a kindly expression. But his hair is so lovely, so soft and smooth, luxuriant and wavy, with just a shade of bluish light, it is so very black. He has a slight moustache."

"Thanks, my red rosebud," said her sister, kissing her, "why do I complain when I have my dear Rosa's kind eyes, so watchful and bright, always ready to see for me."

And Olive fell asleep, a smile on
Surely some light always remained
poor blind girl.

* * *

The days passed on. Arnold seem
taken into the family; he grew used to
blind gaze, and admired her good spi
sweet engaging ways. She was
musician, and Arnold often sung, in
sweet voice, to her accompanying
harmonium or piano. Rosabella gre
very sister to him, with her merry, fr
selfish good nature.

On the Sunday they sat in Bruce
in the evening Olive playing her har
the crimson and purple sunset sta
white dress, and illumined her face an
hands.

"Your sister is very beautiful," w
Arnold to Rose, whose face lighted
a warm bright smile.

"Dear Olive," she murmured, "
think no one on earth could equal h
face."

* * *

Three weeks passed rapidly by: Arnold rode and walked with Rosabella, sung and talked with Olive, read to and amused Bruce, and fairly captivated stately Aunt Marianne by his chivalrous attentions.





CHAPTER II.

ONE evening they were going to a party, and had assembled in the drawing-room before starting; Olive was looking very lovely in white, deep red roses looping up her dress, her hair turned back from her brow, and fastened by a gold comb, glittering with diamonds—a relic of her mother. Suddenly Arnold said—

“I must leave you soon, Miss Thruxton, to visit my mother, before I go to France.”

The bright flush faded slowly from Olive’s cheeks, her head drooped on her hand, half-unconsciously. He noted this with a feeling of pleasure; could she care for him? for he now knew how dear she had become to him.

Miss Thruxton and Rosabella uttered ex-

pressions of disappointment, and Arnold yielded, not at all unwillingly, to their pressing invitation, and promised to remain one more week. As he made this promise, his eyes sought Olive's face, he saw it lighten, a colour stealing into her cheeks; the large eyes were turned towards him. Ah! how those poor eyes pained him, never, even if she loved him, could they brighten at his approach, or shadow at his going. They went to the party, and he rejoiced in the universal admiration the sisters elicited. It surprised him to see the perfect graceful composure and enjoyment Olive evinced in society; no one would have imagined, who saw her conversing blithely with several people, that she was deprived of sight. Rosabella seemed quite in her element, merry, bright and sparkling; being a good dancer, and a very pretty girl, she had no lack of partners, but several times did she decline to dance, fearing her sister would miss her. After the gaieties were over, they drove home in the early dawn, Rosa's happy tired face leaning on Olive's shoulder; the latter leant back in her corner of the carriage,

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opportunity, but in vain. Olive seemed to shun him, and was somewhat cold and reserved in manner. At last, as the sun was setting in unwonted glory, he and Olive were alone, standing by a great red rose bush. Rosabella had returned to the house on some excuse.

"Olive," began he, after a silence of some minutes' duration, the nightingale's song being plainly heard from a neighbouring copse, "may I dare—can you love me a little, only a little, dearest one?"

Glad tears bedewed the soft blue blind eyes.

"Is it possible you can care for poor Olive Thruxton?"

"Possible!" cried he, seizing her hands, "possible!"

"Do you love me, Arnold?" and the poor eyes were fixed on his face.

"Better than all the world beside. And you, Olive?"

"I love you, Arnold," she replied, in clear low tones.

Arnold clasped her in his arms, and fervently kissed the snowy brow.

“I vow to love you always as my own soul!”

Her tears gushed forth in happy blissful drops; at this moment Rosa appeared. Olive did not hear her step, Arnold smiled and said—

“Here is our dear sister, Olive.”

The blind girl then sprang towards her, and shed her joyful tears on that sympathetic breast.

A few days after, Arnold returned home, previously to quitting it for a rather prolonged sojourn in France. Before his final departure, he came to bid the Thruxton's farewell. It was a lovely September evening when he arrived; at an upper window was poor Bruce's eager face, framed in its bright curls, and in one of the dining-room windows stood Olive, clad in dark blue, her expressive mouth showing the joy in her heart the dim eyes could never evince. As his footstep sounded on the gravel, she stepped forth, holding out her hands, saying—

“My own Arnold!”

He drew her towards him, and kissed her

gently, his heart aching with keen pain, because she could never, never, welcome him, with one of those joy-beaming looks that speak more than words. He spent two days there; she was very peaceful and bright in her demeanour, having perfect faith in him, though she was grieved to part with him so long, yet she was hopeful and happy in his tender love. Rosabella feared, as her sister did not, that in the gay capital of France, Arnold might meet some fair beauty who might win his heart from Olive.

“If only Ollie could see, I should have no fear for her, none could then equal her!”

So Arnold departed, carrying with him a picture, of which Olive was the centre; a remembrance of a fair English home, of Olive, standing in the doorway, listening to his departure, tears in her poor eyes, the sun gilding her white dress, and making a halo of her long hair. He also remembered Rosa's sisterly farewell, and her shy, heart-felt whisper—

“Arnold, don't forget Olive!”



CHAPTER III.

ONE bright day in the early part of the next spring, the boulevards of fair Paris were thronged with gay equestrians and pedestrians. Slowly strolling along one of the most crowded thoroughfares, was Arnold Courtland. His thoughts were filled with visions of that fair English home so far away ; of the young, trusting girl, who had given him her heart's first pure love. Suddenly an elegant barouche dashed past, in which he caught a glimpse of a girl, whose golden, wavy curls reminded him of the peculiarly richly-tinted hair of the Thruxtons. The carriage drew up before a jeweller's shop, and the girl stepped down and passed into the house. She was very beautiful, and very prettily attired in pale lavender silk and

white lace. The other lady, who remained in the carriage, was a haughty, patrician-faced, dark-haired dame. Obeying an impulse, Arnold paused, as if to gaze in the window, in reality to look at the girl as she came out from the shop.

In a few minutes she swept through the doorway, holding her dainty head up proudly, with the air of an empress. Arnold saw a bright face of the most piquant, bewitching beauty, a complexion of the most faultless white and carmine; small crimson lips, just revealing flashing, pearly teeth. On seeing Arnold's fixed gaze, the haughty head was raised yet higher, while the dark, liquid eyes flashed an indignant, but half-coquettish, glance.

He stood in amazement, looking after the fast-disappearing carriage. Where had he seen those sparkling, hazel eyes before, and those thick yellow curls, almost the very counterpart of Olive Thruxton's? Ida? no, ridiculous! Peremptorily he demanded of a boy lounging near whose carriage it was.

"Did he not know the great Count D'Acourt's?" returned the youth.

Arnold passed on in bewilderment. It could not be. He returned and said—

“Was that his wife and daughter?”

“*Oui, Monsieur,*” said the boy; “is not *Mademoiselle beautiful?*”

“What is her name?”

“*Mademoiselle D’Acourt,*” was the laconic answer.

“Her Christian name, you young rogue?”

“*Louise.*”

Giving him a small coin, he passed on. That night, at the theatre, he again saw the lovely *Mademoiselle D’Acourt*, glittering in diamonds and lace.

Some days after this, he was invited to a ball given by a nobleman he knew. The evening was well advanced when the “*Comte, Comtesse, and Mdle. D’Acourt*” were announced. The Count was a tall, blue-eyed man, with a very haughty bearing, and silver-grey hair. The Countess was splendidly attired, but all Arnold’s attention was engrossed by “*Louise,*” who was dressed with coquetishly-studied simplicity.

Later on, Arnold was introduced to her, and found himself dancing with the enchant-

ing *belle* of the room. She was very young, being scarcely seventeen, and but newly inducted into society, but she possessed a self-possession, vivacity and mind far beyond her years. Her conversation was sparkling and brilliant, but between all her entrancing beauty and wit rose the pure, dearly-loved blind face and gentle voice of the sweet English girl.

Whether through his daughter's influence or not, the Count invited him to visit him at his hotel, therefore; the next afternoon found him waiting in a grand reception-room at the Count's residence.

By-and-by, the servant returning, ushered him into a pretty *boudoir*, fitted with purple hangings, delicate statuettes gleaming from the corners. Seated at work near a small table, inlaid with silver and ebony, was Mademoiselle D'Acourt. She looked fresh and bright, wholly unfatigued by the preceding evening's gaieties. The Countess, whose keen black eyes appeared to pierce him through, welcomed him courteously.

"Ah, here is our English cavalier," cried Louise, holding out her little hand.

He remained some time, and, at the Countess's request, her daughter being, in the first notes of her voice, in sweet tones like Olive's; it was not so full, and had a sparkle in its tones like her face; but the song was in French. But still the voice of this sparkling girl resembled that of the quiet Olive Trevanion. Arnold could not forbear saying—

"How strongly you remind me of a friend I have in England, Mademoiselle."

"I! do I? I am not considered like the sober English, as a rule," cried Mademoiselle, with something like a pout and a hint of scorn. Arnold felt vexed.

"But, Mademoiselle, all the English are not as sober as you appear to think. I know a girl who is as merry and cheerful as a swallow."

"English? French?" she returned, coolly. "A great friend, perhaps?"

"Yes," he replied, flushing, "I am betrothed to her sister, the one whom you resemble."

"Betrothed? You? Oh, how interesting! And I resemble your *amie*?"

But the pretty, bright face clouded over.

After his departure, Louise hurried to her room, where a few vexed tears were shed over the fact that the handsome Englishman was engaged.

“I will win him, in spite of the stupid English girl ; I will make him my slave.”

* * * * *

What a different scene was that enacted in the English drawing-room, where the two fair sisters were seated. One morning, soon after Arnold's visit to the Count D'Acourt's hotel, Rosabella had just finished reading his letter to Olive. Olive's face was somewhat grave.

“Well, Olive, what do you think? Why don't you say something?”

“Read that again about Mademoiselle D'Acourt.”

So Rosabella read—

“She is very lovely, so bright and piquant, not quite so tall as you, with most brilliant hazel eyes, reminding me of those of your little sister Ida's. Her hair and voice are like yours.”

"They can't be, if she is so sparkling," said Olive, sadly.

"However lovely she is, she cannot compare with you, dearest," replied Rosabella, adding, after a pause, "how funny that she resembles the portrait of our dear little Ida so much. I wonder where she is! Oh, Ollie!" and her head went down on her sister's knee.

"Cheer up, Rosie; God has taken care of her, whether dead or alive, I feel certain," murmured Olive, gently smoothing the locks of Rosa's dear, thoughtful head. "And as for myself, I am very wrong to feel so distrustful about this beautiful French lady. I never have felt any fear before, all the time he has been gone. Oh, Rosie, dearest sister, you are one treasure; only death can take you from me! And my Arnold? words cannot tell how good and brave he is to care for a poor, blind, useless, girl like Olive Thruxton!"

* * * * *

Some weeks had passed, and Arnold was

seated at his desk writing to Olive, one sultry afternoon in August; the next month he was returning to England; he had become great friends with Louise, but his love was still all Olive's. A servant entering, gave him a note, bearing the seal of the D'Acourt house. It was from the Countess desiring to see him. So in less than an hour afterwards he was seated in her *boudoir*.

"You are no doubt surprised at my request," she began, but you mentioned the Thruxtons of Westbourne, as being the family you are so intimate with; also that they lost a sister about thirteen years ago."

"I did, madame," replied Arnold, feeling intense surprise and expectation.

"Well," continued the lady, "Louise is not our child, and she is English; thirteen years past, my husband and I purchased a golden-haired child of some gipsies. We had no children, and this poor little girl of but four years was evidently stolen. They confessed to having stolen her from parents in a good position in life, but would tell us nothing further for fear of punishment. She

spoke English, and cried for ‘mamma.’ But soon she grew accustomed to us, and forgot her own language, which in after years we had her instructed in, as in a foreign tongue; she speaks it fluently, as you do French. She does not know but that the Count and I are in truth her parents.”

“Had you any clue, madame?”

“This,” handing him a small painted portrait (the very duplicate of that in the dining-room at Westbourne). “It was in her dress pocket, the thieves did not take it from her, hoping, I believe, that she would in some indirect way be restored to her friends. Her name they did not know, neither would they have told us had they been aware of it; they gave her the name of ‘La Belle,’ which we changed to Louise.”

Arnold now started to his feet.

“Madame, I know who she is; she is the long lost Ida Thruxton, sister of my *fiancée*. Oh, Madame D’Acourt (and his voice grew hoarse), why did you not seek her parents? Her poor mother died broken-hearted at her loss.”

Her face grew pale, frightened tears stood in her keen black eyes.

“ Oh, monsieur, do not tell me that ! ”

“ She died broken-hearted,” was the stern reply, “ the poor father’s hair was grey before his death, though he was still a young man. And you, madame, you and your husband could easily have found them out, and restored their beloved child.”

“ How ? ” she moaned.

“ Why, the portrait you had ! ”

“ Ah, spare me, we had no child ! We loved her as our own. She loves us ! ”

“ Well, madame,” he said, more gently, “ give her back now to her family.”

“ Restore her now ! ” cried she, springing up, “ now ! Oh, No ! no, no, no ! Would you rob a parent of her child ? Her friends must have given her up for ever now—forgotten her ! I implore you, sir,” she sunk on her knees at his feet, “ let her be still our ‘ Louise.’ Do not rob us of her ! ”

“ Dear madame,” said he raising her, “ reflect, she has a brother and two sisters, who have kept a warm place in their hearts

for 'Ida.' It is the only reparation you can make them."

"Reparation, sir! do you reflect on the advantages she has had as our child; the wealth, care and love lavished on her?"

"I reflect, madame, on her mother's broken-hearted grief."

"Ah, *la pauvre mère*," she cried, again sinking on her knees, and bursting into tears of remorse and sympathy.

"Nay, do not weep so; she is at peace for evermore; restore Ida!"

"Your proofs, that she is Ida Thuxton," she exclaimed with a total change of manner.

"Proofs! do you think it needs more proof, Mdme. D'Acourt; this little picture is the proof."

She snatched it from his hand, and dashed it on the floor; it lay shattered; the back fell out. Arnold examined it, half-hoping to find some convincing proof in it. Suddenly he cried—

"See, madame, 'Ida Thruxton (engraven here) taken 18—, aged four years.'"

"Ah! it is true."

She sank half-swooning into a chair. After a few moments she said almost humbly—

“ You are right, I will tell her all ; she shall choose between us, between England and France. This evening your answer shall come.”

Arnold departed, full of gratitude to Heaven for his strange discovery, and anxiety as to what would be her decision. With much excitement, he awaited the answer. It came in the shape of a dainty note, sweetly scented, written in the girl's small French handwriting—

“ DEAR MR. COURTLAND,—

“ What wonder ! I English ! how crest-fallen I feel ! It is like a romance. Stolen by gipsies ! I am so grieved that dearest *maman* is not my own mother, or the darling old Count my father. I am quite bewildered, you may imagine, and have shed oceans of tears. I little thought you would prove me to be some one else. I will go to England for a time, and just see my brother

and sisters. Just think, you will be my brother-in-law ; I shall hope to see you in England ; we return to our *belle* Normandie in a few days, dreading the gossiping attention of Paris. Oh, Mr. Courtland, my own poor mother ; do you know that when very little, I had a faint idea of a fair-tressed lady and a tall gentleman petting me, but was taught to think it a dream ; and had forgotten it till now. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Count and Countess D'Acourt, for their unspeakable kindness to me. By-the-by, they had me instructed well in English, as this note will show. Adieu.

“ Yours,

“ IDA.”

Arnold laid down this note with a queer feeling of vexation and pleasure, it was such a mixture of almost heartless *sang-froid* and keen feeling. He immediately wrote to Miss Thruxton and to Olive, enclosing the missive that was so good an exponent of Ida's character.

Meanwhile “ Louise,” as we must no longer

call her, sat in her *boudoir*, feeling a great deal more than she had allowed to appear in her note to Arnold Courtland. Her face was very pale, her eyes heavy with weeping; her whole affections, prejudices and customs had received a severe shock; she was so entirely French, that to find herself by birth and parentage English, was no small shock to her; pity, love, sympathy, were oddly divided between her real mother and Maman D'Acourt. She had been so happy that afternoon amongst her birds and flowers, when madame had entered, and in broken sobs told her all. And Ida had clung to her, vowing never to leave her; but was at last prevailed on to promise to spend one year as a trial in England, being consoled by the promise that they would always be a father and mother to her. And did no resentment against the woman, whose cruel detention of her had crushed her own mother's heart and spirit, move the young girl? Ah, yes, but very faintly, for how she loved *maman*. It thrilled her with strange sad feeling to hear of the gentle mother, who had so mourned

for her poor Ida, her blithe, gay, careless spirit had to bow under a heavy burden ; a burden so complex and strange, that as yet she could scarce understand of what its weight was composed.

The sun shone brightly on Olive's rich curls, as early one summer's morning she sat by Bruce's couch. The brother and sister looked very happy ; he was progressing rapidly, and soon would be permitted to walk on crutches ; in a few weeks Arnold would come home. Suddenly the door flew open, Rosabella rushed in, flushed, excited, tearful, exclaiming—

“Olive, Bruce, such news !” and then sobbed hysterically.

“Rosa, what is the matter ?” cried Bruce, while Olive's pale lips strove to ask—

“Is Arnold ill ?”

“Ida is found ; and oh, Ollie, she is the very French girl Arnold wrote about.”

Olive grew faint and white, her brother's wide-opened eyes stared with amazement at Rosabella, who, sinking down by the couch, sobbed.

“ Oh, would our parents were alive.”

Aunt Marianne now came in, tremulous and in tears. Who can describe their joy, the tears and embraces? How often that wonderful letter was read, how the father and mother were whispered of in broken tones!

“ Only to think my own Arnold should be the one to find our little pet,” cried Olive.

“ How dared they keep her so long, without seeking her relations,” exclaimed Bruce, an indignant flash in his blue orbs, as he thought of the slow years of anguish his parents had endured.

“ Bruce, darling, I can’t help pitying that poor Madame D’Acourt; but how firm Arnold was with her,” said Rosabella, softly.

“ God does indeed bring wonderful things to pass,” murmured Miss Thruxton, reverentially, with a dreamy smile.

* * * * *

One bright day in the next month, September, Arnold arrived; as Olive clung to him, she murmured—

“ Faithful and brave, my own true knight!”

As he kissed the blind, bright face, and felt

Rosa's gentle clasp, meeting her speaking thankful glance, he felt rewarded for all the battles he had fought against the winning influence of Louise.

It was a drizzly evening early in November, but the Thruxtons' house was bright with lights, flashing from its windows; inside the house looked at its best, cosy, cheerful and bright; the tasteful drawing-room, decked with flowers, the hall looking very pretty and comfortable, ornamented with evergreen wreaths and stands of hot-house plants. Seated in the dining-room were the waiting aunt, and brother and sister; the crimson curtains were closely drawn, the fire and lamps burnt clearly; autumn flowers were placed here and there in vases.

Bruce lay on the sofa, his large eyes thoughtfully gazing around; Olive sat in a low easy chair by the fire-side, with Rosabella's head resting on her knees, she looked pale and quiet; Miss Thruxton, clad in stiff rustling black silk, sat gazing thoughtfully into the fire, her spectacles on the open Bible, placed on the table by her side.

Presently a carriage turned in at the gate,

and whirled rapidly up to the door; Rosabella started to her feet, glancing wistfully at the portrait of baby Ida.

“Come, Olive,” she said.

Poor Olive! Her great joy struggled with a feeling of dread, and an undefined gloomy forecasting. Rosabella went out, and opened the door; the carriage door was flung open, and, muffled in velvet and furs, Ida descended, feeling weary and disheartened—the parting with the D’Acourts had tried her very much: the gloomy night, the foggy air, the pattering rain, all combined to cause her prejudices against England to revive in full force. Truth to tell, she did not feel very happy or amiable, as the carriage stopped at the door of her parental home; with a strange medley of contending emotions, she hastily descended, she saw a cheerful vista of lights and flowers, and a pretty half-tearful face and outstretched hands; then Rosabella’s arms were round her, and warm kisses pressed on her cold brow and lips.

“Oh, dearest Ida,” sobbed Rosa, “we are so glad, dear sister!”

Ida returned her embrace with fervour, and then Miss Thruxton held her in a long silent clasp. Leading her into the room, she said—

“This is your brother,” indicating Bruce, who stood leaning on his crutches, “poor boy, you have heard of his sad accident; I think he remembers you very much better than your sisters do; they were but five years old when you were lost.”

The meeting between brother and sister over, Rosabella took Olive’s hand.

“This is our Olive, Ida,” she said.

Ida could not forbear a start and smothered exclamation; as she met those fixed blue eyes she shrank back a little. Aunt Marianne felt a little vexed, Rosa’s eyes filled; Olive’s face had flushed, she stood hesitating for a moment, then whispered—

“Where is she, Rosie?”

Ida answered for her.

“Here, dear Olive,” flinging her arms round her neck.

“May I feel your features?” asked Olive, whose face had grown brighter again.

"Why? Oh, yes, I forgot."

"Let me take your hat and wraps first," said Miss Thruxton. "Now, then, come Olive."

With an intensely thoughtful expression of interest, the blind girl passed her hand several times over Ida's features and hair.

"Thanks, dear," she said at last, kissing her tenderly. "Rosie, will you take her to her room; I am sure she is tired."

Ida followed Rosabella to the bright little chamber prepared for her; she stood before the fire, feeling rather inclined for an hysterical burst of tears, while her sister opened her boxes, and arranged her things a little.

"Come, dear one, will you not change your dress? you will feel refreshed then."

Ida kissed her impulsively.

"I shall love you, Rosabella."

"Thanks," was the smiling reply, "all of us in time, I trust."

"I don't know how I shall do without a lady's-maid," Ida cried, taking down her hair.

"I will help you. We never had one, but

you may if you wish, dear ; meantime let me arrange these wayward locks."

So Rosa smoothed the glittering waves.

"Your hair is very like Olive's, rather brighter."

"How dreadful it is, that she is blind."

"Nay, Ida," replied Rosabella, a quiver in her voice, "don't think so ; dear Ollie, so cheerful and calm, and so happy ; betrothed, as you know, to Arnold Courtland."

"Yes, I cannot think how he can marry a blind girl."

"Hush, Ida," was the somewhat stern reply. "Olive will make him a good helpful wife."

"Forgive me, Rosie."

When her attire was completed, Ida requested to see her mother's picture ; Rosa led her to her room.

"What a quaint old room, do you sleep here ? Ah ! my mother ; Rosabella, I should like to kiss her."

She mounted a chair, and pressed her fresh young lips to the pictured face, then descending, she burst into passionate tears, covering

her face with her pretty, begemmed hands. Grieved and astonished, her sister strove to calm her by sweet words of loving sympathy; between convulsive sobs, she cried—

“ Oh, my mother ! My dear own mother ! Rosabella, you and the others have enjoyed the inestimable happiness of knowing our dear parents ; and I ? I, too have believed myself blest with parents ; and now have been told I am not their child ! Ah, me ! *ma belle* France, would God I were still in sweet Normandie ! This England is so strange, so drear ! Ah, me ! ”

Rosabella's fair face had flushed with pain, but she said gently, with a wistful smile—

“ Dear Ida, it is hard for you, but you have two sisters and a brother, who will love you dearly ; will you not care for them a little ? ”

“ Ah, little Rosie, I love you already ; and no doubt shall soon love the others. But I do wish Olive were not blind,” she added in a whisper.

“ Ida, will you not come down ? ” was all Rosa's answer ; but there was a sound of subdued pain in her voice.

Ida dried her tears, and followed her sister down to the dining-room; Miss Thruxton was just taking her place at the head of the substantial tea-table, the blind girl's face was turned towards the door, as she listened to the new foot-fall added to her home.

Ida saw Bruce's blue eyes gazing at her tear-stained face with pitying interest. Crossing over to his sofa, she put her hand in his, and bent to kiss his forehead, he drew her face to his shoulder.

"My own little Ida," he murmured; and in that brief moment she enjoyed her first gleam of a brother's protecting love; it was with a happy trusting face she took her place at the table. As the meal proceeded, her spirits rose; partly from strangeness, partly from excitement, she grew very talkative and merry. Miss Thruxton gazed at her new-found niece with bewildered admiration; Bruce, with tender interest, regarded the sister he remembered as the baby pet Ida. Rosabella joined in the mirth with her usual sweet sympathy; but poor Olive's face was pale, and she seemed oppressed with



a sudden fear; this bright beauty, this Parisian belle, would she not win Arnold's love from her? Later in the evening Ida approached her own portrait.

"Who is this? Can it be I?"

"Yes, dear," replied Bruce, limping to her side, "you as I can recall you, my little pet, my baby sister."

The brilliant eyes filled and drooped; turning to rejoin the fireside group, she murmured—

"Home is sweet, after all."

So passed the first evening of her sojourn in her parents' home; was the loving mother permitted to look down upon her child, reunited to her family, the lost found? It almost seemed as though some gentle, invisible presence were there, for soft, calm peace fell o'er the group, on which the firelight gleamed. The lovely face, resting against Miss Thruxton's knee, looked perfectly happy. Rosabella and Olive sat, hand-in-hand, feeling that nothing could ever lessen or estrange their affection. One heart-grieving incident occurred. When the servants assembled for

prayers, and Miss Thruxton was opening the large Bible, Ida rose, and saying—

“I am a Catholic,” was about to quit the room.

Dismayed silence ensued, till Rosabella, the peacemaker, said gently—

“Will you not unite with us in praise for your return, this one night?”

And Ida returned to her chair, and, her head bent with the others, her amen was added to the short thanksgiving offered, her beautiful voice arose in the evening hymn.

Afterwards, with grateful tears in their eyes, smiles on their faces, and peace in their hearts, the young people stood round Miss Thruxton, while with fingers trembling with emotion, she wrote on the family page, beneath the notice of Ida’s sad loss, “The lost is found; God’s mercy faileth never. Dear Ida was restored to us, Nov. 8th, 18—.”

Time went on; Christmas arrived. The intervening period had been spent by them very quietly, and, as it appeared to the vivacious Ida, after the first excitement had passed off, rather dully. The even routine of their

life wearied her; the want of gaiety, the change from the bright French capital, or the lovely Normandy home with its merry guests and *fêtes*, to the simple pleasures and duties of her newly-found English home, seemed wearying and dismal enough to her. Her aunt's somewhat reserved kindness appeared very cold, after the petting and lavish indulgence of M^dme. D'Acourt. She soon learnt to love Rosabella, and to appreciate her never-varying sweetness and unselfishness; but with Olive she felt a reserve; her poor sister's affliction seemed appalling and disheartening; she shrank from her companionship. The other felt this very keenly, drew back into herself, and clung with renewed fervour of affection to Rosa's firm love.

Her religion was the great barrier between them, grieving Miss Thruxton very much. It was with no little pleasure that she learnt that Arnold Courtland and his mother were to spend Christmas with them.

On Christmas Eve everything, therefore, was gay and cheerful, Ida being in wild

spirits, Rosa pleasant and mirthful, although rather anxious on her sister's account.

"What would Mrs. Courtland think of her future daughter-in-law?" Olive looked at her best, her blue velvet dress setting off her golden tresses and statue-like beauty.

They arrived; she went forward with outstretched hands and mute joy. Mrs. Courtland had been attracted by Ida's lovely face, and, for the moment, hoped she was her son's choice, but no "blind, blue eyes." Slightly disappointed, she turned away, and saw her son holding Olive's hand, and heard him saying—

"Dear mother, this is your daughter."

She took her in her arms, kissing her fervently. The girl's face lighted up wonderfully. Relieved and joyful, she clung to the stately lady, feeling that she would welcome her as a daughter—that Arnold's mother would be hers.

Rosabella, meanwhile, keenly glanced at Mrs. Courtland. She was a tall, stately, handsome lady, with olive complexion, very dark eyes, rich dark hair, slightly silvered.

She looked clever, strong, and pleasing; a little stern and hard, perhaps; but her kind greeting to Olive quite won Rosa's heart.

In the evening the little *coterie* of young people played and sung some of their most interesting songs and music, the two elder ladies sitting apart conversing and listening with delighted attention to the impromptu concert.

"Your nieces and nephews," remarked Mrs. Courtland, "could make a fortune by their sweet voices. Their beauty, also, is uncommon; Ida's is perfect. What a sweet face Olive's is! And Bruce, when that delicate look has worn off, will make a striking-looking man; but I must confess that Rosabella is, as yet, my favourite; what a good, sweet-tempered girl she appears."

"Yes," replied Miss Thruxton, warmly, "she is our cheery home-bird, our sweet red rose; and, above all, our peacemaker."

In the midst of their mirth a low tap was heard at the door, and a young girl entered.

She was of middle stature, slight and upright, with dark hair turned off her face, and honest, blue eyes.

“Oh, Annabel,” cried Rosabella eagerly, “I am so glad you have come; this is Mrs. Courtland; you know Arnold already.”

Annabel Heath was the daughter of the parish clergyman, and had been a playmate in childhood of the Thruxtons. She had shared alike their sorrow at their sister's loss, and their joy at her return.

Ida liked her, more especially as she had once spent some time in Paris.

She felt great concern and grief to think Ida had been educated in a mistaken religion, and had spoken earnestly with her on the subject. The latter had at first seemed both hurt and angry; but afterwards appeared to listen to her friend's gentle words.

Annabel led a simple, practical religious life that was not without its effect on her volatile friend, and which bore out her words. On this evening she spent some time with them, and sat for a while by Bruce's couch quietly, knitting.

“Who is that sock for, Anna?” said he.

“For old Mrs. White's grandson, poor little boy; she is a thriftless old woman.”

"If you said a dishonest old woman you would be nearer the truth, Miss Anna," said he, smiling.

"Ah, I don't care to speak evil of people," said she, shyly, raising her eyes.

"You are a dear, good girl, Anna. Does Rosa help you much in the parish?"

"Yes, a very great deal; she is so beloved by the poor, and Olive's teaching is, I find, very efficacious; the children are so impressed by it—her blindness, you know."

"Yes, my sisters are very dear little treasures, Olive and Rosie, I must say; about Ida I am not so sure."

Annabel looked across the room at the brilliant girl talking to Mrs. Courtland.

"She is so lovely one could almost forgive her anything."

"Sometimes I can hardly forgive her cold treatment of Olive," interposed Bruce, hastily.

"Hush, Bruce, don't say that; her education has been so different from your other sisters; I feel convinced she possesses very excellent qualities. I only wish her religion

was the same as ours. It may be interfering of me, but, with God's help, I mean to do what little I can to convert her."

"You will have our most earnest wishes for your success, Anna."

After a silence of some minutes, Bruce said with a sigh—

"I wonder how much longer I must lie here, wasting my youth and life."

"Don't say wasting; you are learning a lesson of patience and endurance. You don't know," she added, half laughing, "how much less hasty you are than you used to be."

He laughed, then said gravely—

"Do you know, Anna, that if ultimately I am quite cured, I am going to become a clergyman, and go abroad as a missionary."

Annabel's eyes gleamed with a proud, bright enthusiastic light for one moment, and then she paled suddenly.

"Are you not well, Annabel?"

"Yes; but I was thinking how we should miss you, Bruce," was the half-inaudible answer.

"Poor little Anna! Why, a tear, I de-

clare! Why, Anna, I thought you would be glad to hear my choice; remember, how we used to talk it over when we were children."

"Yes, so I am glad, Bruce, only remember that text my father is so fond of."

"Yes," said the youth, solemnly, "'No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God.'"

Annabel now rose; putting up her work, she held out her hand.

"Are you going, Annabel, already?"

"My father needs me; it is Christmas Eve. Hark! how sweetly the bells are chiming. Good-by, dear Bruce."

"Good-by; be sure and come to-morrow."

"Yes, Annabel," cried Ida, coming up, "mind you do come, and in return I will come to your church" (in a low tone).

"Don't say 'in return,' darling. Of your own free will let it be."

"It is; I shall miss M. and Mdme. D'Acourt to-morrow, and will go with my family. Oh, I do miss dear *Maman*. I should be so happy if they were here, and my own parents. Oh, Anna!"

"Poor child," said her friend, "is happy. Remember, we are sympathizing with each other in being motherless."

Rosabella accompanied Elizabeth to the front door. Placing a veil on her face and shoulders, she walked slowly with her down the path.

They passed in the garden: it was a still frosty night; the moon shined the light and trees; the silence of the bells rang clear in the keen air, bringing her and near the good tidings of great joy."

Rosabella looked back at the brightly-lighted house.

"What strange things have happened since last Christmas; dear Edie is restored to us. What will be before this time next year? Will Olive be married, or dead?" Bursting into hysterical tears, she turned to Elizabeth.

The latter felt shocked and astonished. She had never seen Rosa like this before.

"Married, or dead! Dearest Rosa, what are you thinking of? Our lives are uncertain, it is true; but why such gloomy forebodings? You are unstrung and excited. I

understand in some part that you are anxious about Olive's future welfare. Ida is, it is true, very brilliant and engaging ; but I believe Arnold's spirit to be strong and faithful. Leave it and all troubles in the hand of One who has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. Be not over-anxious, little birdie. Now, good-night ! ”

Rosabella flung her arms round her friend's neck.

“ How you have comforted me, dear Annabel ; what a lot you see, with your quiet, dark eyes ; you seem destined to be our consoler, especially poor Bruce's,” she added, mischievously.

Annabel hastily disengaged herself and hurried off, thinking—

“ Dear little Rosie, she never thinks of herself, always of others ; how strange she should have such gloomy forebodings, so foreign to her nature. May they never prove true.”

The next morning they all attended the little village church. Ida seemed subdued and impressed by the simple, heartfelt service and sermon.

Annabel Heath returned to lunch with them, her father promising to come in the evening. The short afternoon soon passed by; Ida took Annabel to see the lovely Parisian presents Monsieur and Madame D'Acourt had sent her. The latter embraced the opportunity to say a few earnest, serious words, which the gay, thoughtless girl heard with barely-concealed impatience, but which were, nevertheless, destined to bear fruit in after days.

"I can't see, Anna," was the petulant remark, "why you will not leave my religion alone; do I interfere with yours?"

"Dearest Ida, I love you far too well to rest without trying to bring you to a knowledge of the true religion."

The other shrugged her shoulders; her full lips pouted, and tears filled her eyes as she gazed out on the distant hills, over which the evening dusk was closing.

"I wish I were at home," she murmured.

Just then Rosabella entered—

"Come, dears, it is time to dress; Bruce wishes to speak to you, Anna. Ida, aunt

wants you to show your little jewel-case to Mr. Heath, who has just arrived ; it is such a little gem. And then come to my room, and we will all dress together."

Running upstairs, Rosabella found Olive musing by the fire in their room ; the face she turned towards her sister was very happy and lovely. Rosa clasped her closely, her heart full of pitying affection.

"Rosie, I'm so very happy ; Mrs. Courtland is so kind. We had a long talk this afternoon ; Arnold and I are to be married in May or June."

Rosabella kissed her, with falling tears.

"Don't cry at my joy, Rosie ; it seems to come as a bad omen."

Rosie checked her tears, drew the curtains, stirred the fire, and lit the candles ; then returning to Olive, she spoke a few words of joyful hope.

Annabel and Ida came in, their arms entwined, and there was no more quiet talk, for the latter was in wild spirits, chatting and laughing, exhibiting her new Paris-made dress.

It was a pretty, cosy scene ; the long old

room, the quaint furniture, red curtains and glowing fire, the four happy girls. Rosa arranged her sister's hair in long, full curls, twining a wreath of blue and white flowers amongst the glossy locks.

Never had Olive looked better than she did that Christmas night; her cheeks were flushed with joy and hope. Her white dress suited her well; the blue flowers in hair and bodice set off her golden hair.

"Really, Olive, you look like a bride," cried Ida, turning from the mirror, after a prolonged survey of her silken robe. "Why did you not put some more colour in her attire, Rosa?"

"White suits her the best."

"And she will soon be a bride," added Annabel.

"Yes," laughed Rosa, gaily, "I am getting my hand in."

Annabel had cheerfully assumed her plain muslin dress and pink ribbons, full of admiration, untouched by one breath of envy, for the richer dress and more striking beauty of her companions; but Olive advanced

towards her with a gleaming gold necklet, with diamond-set locket. Claspings it round her throat, she said—

“This our present to our Annabel.”

Anna was overwhelmed with pleasure at the beautiful gift, and the love and kindness which prompted it.

That evening proved a time of unshadowed felicity; dancing, music, singing and games filled up the time pleasantly. When the other guests had left, Annabel went to change her attire, preparatory to walking home.

“You look grave, dear Rosabella,” she said to the girl, who, with quiet face, leant against the dressing-table.

But not even to Annabel could Rosa tell her secret fear, that Ida might win Arnold’s love from poor Olive; so lightly parrying the question, she ran downstairs. With a sigh did she close the hall door, after seeing, with wistful eyes, the father and daughter set off on their homeward walk, under the star-lit heavens.

Poor Rosa’s heart was sore for the dead parents she loved so well; what an inesti-

mable boon would their love and advice be. Turning into the dining-room, she found the family assembled for prayers, which Miss Thruxton would never omit, least of all on Christmas night. Taking her fears and troubles to her Heavenly Father, she rose from her knees with so placid and bright a face, that as Bruce gave her his good-night kiss, he said—

“My little Sister Sunshine, what a blessing your bonnie face is!”

Some pleasant weeks passed by; then the mother and son went home, and dullness closed down again, at least *ennui* for the volatile Ida. Poor Rosie had enough to do to cheer her, tend Olive, and amuse Bruce, whose health and strength rapidly improved, and whose eager spirit beat against the bars of his enforced captivity.

“Would the time of active life never return?”





CHAPTER IV.

SOME months had passed since the happy party on Christmas night, when one morning, early in June, Olive was sitting alone by the sunny dining-room window. The sun shone brightly, the bees hummed cheerily, the scent-laden breeze stole into the room through the half-opened window, but Olive's face? Whither had its brightness fled?

Rosabella, clad in a light summer's walking-costume, entered, and, walking to the window, looked anxiously at the tear stains on her sister's face.

"What ails you, Olive? Tell me."

"Nothing," was the sole reply, as the blind girl resumed her knitting, which had fallen from her hands.

"Here is such a sweet bunch of May, Ollie ; the lanes are so fragrant."

Olive took the May, held it for a moment, inhaling its delicate perfume, then gave it back to her sister without exhibiting any of her usual pleasure at her, and thoughtfulness in bringing her sweet flowers fresh from shady hedgerows.

Both young faces were paler and thinner than at the winter festivities ; indeed, Olive looked dejected and ill, while Rosa's face was grave and anxious.

"Where are Ida and Arnold ?" asked Olive at last, in a husky tone.

"I met them walking in the lane, dear Olive."

The work fell from the latter's nerveless grasp ; she buried her face in her hands.

"I don't think he cares for me any longer. He marries me out of pity ; it is cruel, cruel. Oh, would that Ida, with her false beauty had never come here."

For one moment Rosabella stood as though thunder-stricken. Then flinging herself on her knees, she put her arms round her sister, crying, in a voice choked with emotion—

"Ollie, Ollie, don't say so ! To-morrow is your wedding eve ; you will be happy, Arnold is true."

"How can you say so ?" the poor girl cried, almost fiercely, "when for weeks he has been getting colder and colder, never even noticing I am not well, paying Ida so much attention!"

"I think it is Ida's fault," said Rosa, half timidly.

"Yes, did not I say it was her fault ? Arnold, my darling, you should love me, your poor blind Olive."

Rising, she tottered a few steps, and fell helpless, ere her terrified sister could gain her side.

Summoning assistance, with a feeling of utter misery and presentiment of coming evil, Rosabella watched the strange swoon Olive lay in.

Arnold had gradually allowed Ida's bewitching beauty to lure him from his allegiance ; he dreaded his union with Olive on account of her blindness, which latterly had oppressed him much. Ida had thrown a glamour around him, so that he seemed in a

dream. As for the thoughtless girl herself, she cared naught for him ; pique at his first indifference to her, and *ennui* at her quiet life, had prompted her to employ all her powerful influences to attract him to her. Not that for a moment did she dream of her sister's breaking heart and failing health. The latter's blindness made the matter worse for her ; she fancied things worse than they really were ; she grew nervous, irascible and despondent. Her state of mind reacting on her never robust health, brought about a condition of weakness and pain that made her still less able to cope with her unfortunate fate.

Later on the morning before spoken of, she was seated on the lawn, wearily reclining in a wicker chair, when Ida and Arnold returned from their walk.

"How very white you look," cried the former, "what have you been doing to yourself ?"

"What ails you, Olive ?" inquired Arnold, tenderly.

Olive's pale face flushed, and tears bedewed



her drooping lashes, as the old, tender tones she had so long pined for, fell on her ear.

“I fainted, Arnold.”

“Fainted, dearest Olive! you must be weak.”

Ida turned carelessly away, a somewhat contemptuous look on her fair face.

“It is to be hoped you will not have an ailing wife, Arnold,” said she.

He gave her a reproachful glance, and Olive’s face coloured deeply.

In the evening, she laid on the sofa in the drawing-room. Arnold’s kindness had, in a measure, restored her confidence in his love, and she enjoyed the rest in the fragrant, dusky room, as she quietly ‘mused on her wedding-day.

Suddenly she heard voices—those of her lover and sister Ida. They approached the window, unconscious of her near vicinity.

“Why do you trouble so about Olive? she is very well; it is only the effect of the heat, and a little temper as well.”

“I must beg of you to cease speaking in that way of Olive. I think she has some

cause for fretting. I fear I have been very neglectful to her of late."

"Indeed! And you insinuate that I am the cause of your negligence?"

"Don't quarrel, Ida; but I do wish you to be more considerate to her."

"Considerate! she is considered too much already, I think. See how Rosie fusses over her. I cannot help wondering what you see in her; she has not even sight."

"Hush, Ida," was the stern answer, "she is your sister; respect her misfortune."

"Yes, I freely own I was ungenerous to say so. I was not thinking. But, Arnold, don't be angry with me. I am so lonely in this *triste* England."

They then moved away, little reckoning of the tortured heart of the poor girl who had overheard her sister's cruel words. Did people indeed think of her in that manner, those people who had always appeared to be so thoughtful of and tender to her, sympathising so sweetly in her dire misfortune? Yes, if her own sister could thus think and speak of her to her betrothed husband, what



must not some acquaintances say ? Ida's words had torn open a new and agonising current of thought, "She has not even sight." Arnold, no doubt, was thought Quixotic for loving her because she was blind ! His prospects might be marred by his being hampered by a "sightless" wife ! Should she give him up ? Did he care for her or not ? Yes, he must love her, for he took her part so firmly, yet, maybe, that was from pity only, and sense of right. She would refuse him and his pity !

Thus thought, in a maze of tortured pain, poor Olive, and the struggle was too much for her weak strength. By-and-by, Rosabella found her faint and half-senseless. All night she was very ill and restless, but in the morning she seemed better and calmer, insisting on getting up to breakfast as usual. Her pale looks pricked Arnold to the core ; but he did not venture to say more than "Good-morning."

The morning dragged heavily ; he was silent, Ida morose ; Rosabella in vain strived to cheer them all. She put out the wedding

garb in the best chamber, talking cheerily of the morrow, but was disheartened by Olive's low spirits and Arnold's cold manner. What had happened to them all? A cold mist seemed enveloping them in its chilly folds.

Late in the afternoon, Olive sought Arnold in the garden. He was by the rose tree by which she had stood the day he told his love, thoughtfully and moodily pulling the leaves off the drooping flowers. When he saw her, he hoped there would be an explanation and reconciliation.

"Olive, I am here," he said, but as she turned and approached him, her face was cold and hard.

"Arnold, I overheard the conversation between you and Ida last evening. I could not help it, I felt paralysed. No doubt her opinion of our engagement is that of most people. I have long feared you tired of me. I think our engagement had better end here."

Thus spake the unfortunate Olive in her aching pain and jealous misery. Arnold started back.

“Olive, our wedding day is fixed for to-morrow.”

“That is of no import,” was the cool reply.

“No import ! Is it of no import ? Do you love me no longer ?”

“You care for me no longer, I fear,” she answered, her tears breaking forth.

“I do, Olive, as well as ever.”

“Your conduct shows it,” she persisted, though her heart trembled.

“Well, as you seem disposed, nay, determined to quarrel, let our betrothal cease here. You will not accept nor listen to an explanation. So be it.”

He moved away ; she groped wildly round. What had she done ? Vainly striving to call him back, she fell heavily to the ground. Arnold, meanwhile, had encountered Rosabella, and said moodily to her—

“Our engagement is ended.”

“Arnold !”

“Olive would have it so.”

“Nay, 'tis not her fault, but your own. If she has overrated your neglect it is because she is blind. It behoves you to be more

tender and thoughtful because of her sad affliction."

Hastily running to find her sister, Rosa could not suppress a startled scream (which brought Arnold back) when she caught sight of the senseless form and still, white face.

Annabel Heath, coming up from the Rectory that evening by appointment, was told by Bruce that Olive was very ill with a kind of low, nervous fever, and that the engagement between her and Arnold was broken off; but that the latter still remained in anxious desire to be reconciled. Whilst she stood dismayed, Rosabella stole out to speak to her.

"Annabel, Annabel!" she sobbed, "my fears are fulfilled."

"Do not despair, dearest Rosa," the other answered, choking back her tears, "after clouds sunshine returns. Their love may be strengthened by sorrow. I feel sure that Arnold really cares for your poor sister; that it is chiefly Ida's fault. You are our sunbeam, you must not grow cheerless. All will end well."



For two weeks Olive seemed at the point of death, but gradually she grew a little better. Tenderly nursed, she at length seemed to be returning to health and strength, but was still very weak, and dreadfully dejected in spirits.

She was at last permitted to lay on the sofa, placed by the window where the soft breeze could reach her, and the sunshine fall through the flickering leaves on her wan face. Arnold was very anxious and tender, but she seemed to shrink from him in doubt, and, to all but Rosa, she grew peevish and distrustful.

Saddened and depressed by her fretful words, Arnold felt Ida's sympathy very welcome, and could scarcely help pitying her lonely position, treated coldly and repulsed by Olive; so that one day, when the former, whose remorse had begun to wear off when the patient was pronounced out of danger, begged him to accompany her for a walk, he consented. Olive missed him, grew very low-spirited, and, in consequence, very weak.

"Directly I am getting better, he forsakes

me again. Oh, Rosa, dear Rosa, you will always love me."

Poor Rosabella, she had hard work to console her sister that afternoon, indeed she was even unreasonably jealous, fretful and desponding, bemoaning her blindness, crying bitterly that no one but "Rosa" cared for her, wishing she had never seen Arnold; then lamenting her peaceful happiness ere Ida came to disturb her tranquil life, finally working herself into a state of weakness that it alarmed her faithful watcher to see. Rosabella felt for all: for Olive, sinking under the load she could not shake off, which seemed caused chiefly by the suspicion and low spirits indigent to her blindness and illness; for Arnold, hurt by her coldness, lamentations and distrust; and for Ida, annoyed, defiant and thoughtless, homesick and restless, little dreaming what stars of comfort her own kindly grey orbs were to all three.

Late in the afternoon, Arnold and Ida returned: the former immediately hastened upstairs to see Olive; his companion lingered in the sunshine a little while, then she went



into the house. How dark the hall seemed, how still the whole place; the ticking of a distant clock was plainly heard in the death-like hush.

With a feeling of nervous foreboding she could not account for, she stole silently up to her sister's room. They were all gathered round the couch; Arnold kneeling by the side in an attitude of passionate despair. In amazement, Ida stepped forward, and a cry of bewildered terror broke from her trembling lips as she saw the white face on which the sunlight fell, making an aureole of the golden locks clustering round the still form. Her brother rose, and said, with a fierceness yet more terrible from being repressed—

“Olive is dead, and you have killed her!”

She strove to utter an indignant protest, but speech failed her. She looked in inquiring anguish at Rosabella, whose sad, scarce audible, “It is too true; she is dead,” turned her fainter and whiter than before. She tried to speak, but words became a strangled sound between a sob and a scream. Her fingers clutched her throat, she seemed

choking, the room span round and round, and, with a moaning cry, she fell senseless. Rosabella rose quickly, and when she saw the white face, and the red marks where the delicate fingers had clutched the fair, convulsed throat, she said to Bruce, who had also risen—

“You were too hasty, too harsh; poor girl.”

Well might she say “poor girl,” for what a coming back to life was hers in the solitude of her own room. All the past few months, all her follies, coquetry and envy which had appeared so slight before this terrible catastrophe, now rose before her tortured gaze. Rosa came to her, and, heedless of her own speechless grief, tried to comfort her; but all in vain.

“I never thought she felt it so much; I was so very lonely, and he was kind to me. I meant it not, and again, it was all my fault, not his,” she clung in terror to her sister.

“Poor Ida, hush, Olive was weak and ill, she fell asleep and died peacefully while still asleep; poor girl, her blindness made her

think matters worse than they really were. But, oh, Ida, Ida," and tears stopped the sweet quivering tones.

Annabel Heath came to nurse Rosa, who fell weak and ill. Arnold was nearly maddened by remorseful grief, whilst Ida was left alone to bear her bitter burden of vain remorse and despair.

Late in the evening a knock came at the door of the room, where she sat alone; she opened it, a tall dark man stood there, whose kind keen eyes looked pityingly at her.

"Oh, Dr. Malcolm," she cried. He drew her into the room again, "tell me all about it, Ida."

When she had finished, he said gently—

"Poor child, you were lonely no doubt in such a different life to your former one; come, trust me; let me be your friend, I was your father's. Come now, Ida, I remember you as a little child on your mother's knee; will you not let me advise you? You have been wrong; you must try to love your native country. Let me recommend you to bear your trial meekly, and to help the others. Annabel Heath is needed at home. Go and

nurse Rosa. Dear child, will you not seek the Saviour Jesus Christ, now, in your sore trouble? He promises to receive all who come to Him, 'Come unto me ye weary, and I will give you rest.' "

He left her, and, weeping softer tears of true sorrowing repentance, she drew near to the footstool of mercy, and turned to Jesus solely for the first time. When on the following evening the Doctor came again, he found Rosabella much better; Ida tenderly cheering her. He was shocked at the change in the latter's bright young face; there were dark circles round the eyes, and a kind of subdued terror in them; he spoke kindly to her, and said she must rest. Rosa, who was lying on a sofa, said she was so much better that she must in her turn nurse Ida; so she took her to her room, and assisted her to prepare for rest. The latter had fallen asleep through sheer weariness; but Rosa, weeping bitterly, lay awake—what a blank had fallen on her life!—when just as the clock struck twelve, she heard a faint rustling in the hall outside. Nervous and wakeful, she arose,



and opening the door, looked out; a scream rang shrilly through the silent house; in terror Ida awoke and ran to the door, but crept in amazed alarm back into the room. "What had she seen?" Rosabella senseless on the floor, and a white figure with Olive's blind, blue eyes, standing at the foot of the stairs, which led up to the death-chamber! The others soon arrived on the spot, gazing in blank terror at the spectral figure over which the pale moonlight shimmered softly, silvering the long hair falling round the thin white face; a look of frightened bewilderment dwelt on the ghastly face.

"What does it mean? Rosa, where are you?"

"Where am I?" came in weak tones from the trembling lips. Arnold rushed forward, then paused—"Olive!"

"Arnold, is that you?"

A look of unearthly joy broke over the face, as with hysterical sobs the figure moved towards him; he clasped it in his arms, not knowing whether it were spirit or flesh, only that it was Olive! But he touched a warm



living being, the soft lips were pressed to his brow—all supernatural fears were dispelled.

“ It is Olive,” he cried.

“ Did they think me dead ? ”

Miss Thruxton came forward trembling and tearful—

“ Bring her into my room.”

They bore her in, laying her on the bed ; Bruce sent for Dr. Malcolm, directly he could think at all ; Rosa, slowly recovering from her swoon—dimly remembering that she had seen Olive—was told by her brother, “ that the dead was alive again.” In confused joy she tottered into Ida’s room, joined her, as she knelt with fixed, white face.

“ Oh, Rosa, is it a saint ? ”

“ Dear Ida, it was our sister, don’t shrink back, she was not dead ; I don’t know how it is ; but Dr. Malcolm will soon be here,” she sobbed hysterically.

“ Ah ! Dr. Malcolm,” Ida clasped her hands, her face clearing a little ; drying their tears, the sisters hastily dressed, awaiting the Doctor’s arrival. When the poor bewildered man came, he found Olive in a state of

hysterical nervousness; he gave her a composing draught. speaking a few words of thankfulness and comfort. After a sound sleep, she awoke, calmer and hopeful; asking for Arnold, she held his hand, while she said—

“ Arnold, I could not think where I was, bound up in grave-clothes; I thought, ‘ am I dead? but no, I breathe, they think I am dead!’ Full of horror and agonising terror, I fancied that perchance I was buried alive, oh Arnold! But then the familiar sound of the birds twittering in the eaves fell on my ear; surely I was in my own room; I got up as best I could and managed to open the door, and came slowly downstairs; midnight struck, I heard Rosa shriek; you all came murmuring and wondering, terrified; I heard your voice, Arnold. Never, never, had I so longed for sight, as when I awoke from that strange slumber! Is Dr. Malcolm here?”

“ Yes, my dear Olive, I am. It was a trance, my child; but now, please God, you will become quite strong again.”

But Olive shrieked in terror: “ I might have been buried alive. Arnold, Rosie, save me!”

Till the dawn broke, fainting-fits alternated with shrieks, moans and hysterical laughs, then she fell peacefully asleep, and Dr. Malcolm went to tell her sisters that her seeming death was a trance. Ida's joy and relief were most touching. "I have not killed her; she lives," and Rosabella, who could tell her joy? Riding home through the cool dawn, the doctor called at the rectory to tell its inmates, who had already risen, the wonderful news. There were special thanksgivings that day in the little church, and Ida Thruxton stole down from her perturbed home to pray for her sister's health, and to thank God for her delivery from a terrible life-long remorse.

As the evening shadows stole o'er the wearied land, Olive awoke from her long sleep, asking for her brother and sisters and Arnold. Who could describe the meeting with Rosabella and Bruce? As for Ida, she shrank from her at first; perhaps nothing had so keenly pierced her as the sight of the pale face turned from her wistful gaze. But only for a moment. Then the blind girl's



hand fell on Ida's bent head ; the reconciliation was complete.

“ Leave me now, dearest. You are ill and tired, I know, by the sound of your voice,” Olive said after a deep silence (during which the thrush-song in the distance thrilled through the open window, and the evening star gleamed through its curtains of purply-blue), “ Rosa will stay with me.” They all went away, leaving the two twin-sisters alone together, knowing well what they were to each other, the cherished and the cherisher, the protector and protected, the comforter and the comforted. So gently, with gladsome heart, Rosa once more resumed her post of ministering angel to her beloved Olive.





CHAPTER V.

IT was the first of August, a brilliant, hot afternoon, the flowers drooping for evening dews. Ida Thruxton stood at the door of her home. She looked pale and worn, but happy.

The past few weeks had been very trying, though it was easier to “get over” Olive’s return, as it were, to life, when she had only been dead, as they had supposed, a few hours, and they were all longing in an agony of sorrow to see her alive once more; nevertheless, it had been a great shock, unhinging all for a time.

But great joy bore them up; it had been arranged that Olive, her aunt, Bruce, and Rosabella should join Mrs. Courtland at a quiet watering-place, and return in the be-

ginning of October, the wedding taking place about the twenty-first of that month.

Ida, who was a little shy and sorrowful, shrinking from the others, had been invited to stay with Miss Malcolm till their return. So on this sultry afternoon she had waved adieu to the carriageful of pale faces, and was now waiting for her host's pony-chaise, which soon arrived to convey her to her destination. Though she enjoyed the long drive through the sunny landscape between fields golden for harvest, yet she felt tired and languid, when the carriage drew up before the door of a pretty cottage residence.

How homely and cheerful it looked, the sloping lawns, standard rose-trees, and sparkling brooklet. Through the open door came Miss Malcolm; a grave-eyed, graceful woman of thirty-seven. She greeted Ida kindly and affectionately, feeling sorry for the change in the winsome face. She conducted her into a cosy drawing-room, with chintz-covered chairs and sofas. One window looked on the lawn, the other opened on to a green slope, from which a lovely view of the distant hills



was obtained. A gipsy-table was set with an old-fashioned tea-service of blue and gold.

Ida was delighted with the room, its quaint ornaments, and the numerous bouquets of crimson roses placed here and there. Over the carved wood mantel-piece hung, in a massive gilt frame, a picture representing a serious-eyed girl, with short dark hair and white muslin dress, and a little boy, with long black wavy hair, and deep round collar. It needed but a glance at Miss Malcolm to identify her as the original of one figure, while the other, no doubt, thought Ida, is her brother.

Her hostess took off her hat and cloak and gave her some tea, ere leading her to a pretty little bedroom with dimity curtained window. Here Ida changed her attire for a fresh muslin robe of pure white. Then Miss Malcolm and she sat and conversed in the cool, shady drawing-room. When the sun's rays began to decline, and a soft breeze sprang up, they adjourned to the lawn, where Dr. Malcolm found them on his return.

After dinner, the quiet evening was divided



between *Les Graces*, strolls in the garden, and music.

Miss Malcolm soon won her young guest's confidence, and Ida profited very much by the regular, quiet routine of life she and her hostess led. The latter took her to visit the neighbouring poor, to teach in the day schools, &c. She did not mention the subject of religion till Ida spoke of it to her, when she gave her some wise, thoughtful advice, persuading her to study the Bible.

When the girl's health and vivacity were somewhat re-established, she engaged in several quiet parties and amusements.

Ida was very happy, becoming, with her rapid facility (when skilfully guided), domesticated, useful, Anglicised and gentle; and more still, a yearning for a more "satisfying" religion than her own, was slowly but surely springing up in her innermost heart.

Perhaps the times she enjoyed most in all her pleasant visit were the long, sunshiny hours spent in the cool of the drawing-room, when Miss Malcolm conversed with her in French of France, in which country she had

spent several years; or the quiet twilight time, when Dr. Malcolm would tell her anecdotes of her father and mother, and of her brothers and sisters as little children. She felt a growing sympathy for them, longing to be taken into the inmost circle of their family love.

She wrote to them, and after much hesitation and Dr. Malcolm's advice, a simple, unaffected letter to Arnold, which he read to Olive, and which did a great deal to cause her to put real, sisterly confidence in Ida.

October came, and the letter which called her home. Her kind host and hostess drove her there. How different was the rosy-cheeked, brilliant-eyed girl who sprang lightly to the ground, from the pale, depressed one, whose crushed spirits had been healed by their sympathy and care.

She looked after her departing friends with tears in her eyes, and a desolate feeling at her heart she could not account for. On the Sunday before the wedding, she was quietly received into the English Church; yes, that religion was the right one which could pro-



duce such characters as Bruce, Rosabella and Annabel Heath !

* * * * *

On the 21st of October, crowds of people, old and young, rich and poor, flocked to the village church to see the wedding of the blind girl, about whom such pitying interest had always clung.

The girl who had been laid out for death was now a bride. The chancel is decked with flowers, the building is thronged with expectant faces. The bridegroom appears, looking so proudly glad : a crush, a hush, the bride comes. Her cheeks are tinged with rose, her curls shine beneath her fleecy veil. She leans on her happy-faced brother's arm, who is entering active life after his long imprisonment.

Amongst the guests are two who attract much notice, Ida's foster-parents, Monsieur and Madame D'Acourt.

The wedding is over. The triumphant march is played, the bells clang out with their merry, deafening peal, as Olive leaves



the church, leaning on her husband's protecting arm.

The red and yellow leaves make an Indian summer's glory around; the school children scatter white blossoms at their feet.

Instead of a tour, they were going to spend a long time with Mrs. Courtland in her Scottish home, Olive and Rosabella being parted for the first time in their lives, except the mournful hours when the former lay in that dead trance. At Christmas the bride and bridegroom would return to Westbourne, and then Rosabella was to accompany them to their own home at Twickenham.

Christmas arrived; all were gathered at the old home. Bruce, fresh from his college residence, was there; he was very fond of his Oxford life, the freer, wider existence being full of attraction to him, after his long illness and seclusion from the outer world; but he held firmly to his idea of being a clergyman and a missionary.

"Have you heard Ida's news?" asked Rosa, entering the dining-room, where her sisters sat, the one knitting, the other painting, on the day after the return home.



“No, what is it, Ida?”

The latter quitted her employment to kneel down by Olive’s side.

“Dear Olive, I am happier than I deserve, I am engaged.” She paused.

“To Dr. Malcolm,” broke in Rosabella’s merry voice.

Olive expressed her surprise, and tenderly congratulated her sister.

“Do Monsieur and Madame D’Acourt approve?” she enquired.

“Oh, yes; at first dear *maman* was disappointed, thinking her adopted daughter might have married higher, but now she is content.”

Hugh Malcolm had hesitated a good deal ere he asked Ida to become his bride. He, a man of six-and-thirty, she a blooming girl of eighteen summers; but young as she was, she had seen a good deal of the world, and never before had she cared for any one as now she did for this grave, quiet man, so much her senior—her father’s friend.

One day, after they had all been for a winter’s walk, Bruce accompanied Annabel

to the Rectory. It was a cold afternoon; the frozen snow crackled under their feet; the moon hung pale in the darkening sky; the fires gleamed cheerfully in the cottage homes. One room looked particularly cheery. A woman bent over a glowing fire, a curly-haired child at her knee, while a man read aloud from a worn book.

"How comfortable they look," said Annabel, drawing her fur-trimmed cloak around her yet more closely.

"Yes, they do. Annabel, will you give me another such home in foreign lands?"

Her face flushed a deeper rose; her sweet, firm mouth quivered. He waited a moment, and then said—

"Forgive me, Annabel, I will not ask you to leave your father; but have you no hope for me, Anna?" and the full voice shook a little; a glance from the dark blue eyes into his brilliant ones, and her hand stole from her muff into his firm clasp. And this was the plighting of Annabel and Bruce. They parted at the Rectory gate; Bruce stooping to kiss the gentle face under the drooping

hat and scarlet plume. Annabel watched the tall figure, limping down the street, for a few moments, then went in and stole quietly to her room, where she knelt down and thanked God for the love of a true man's faithful heart.

Mr. Heath sat in the dainty little sitting-room, waiting for his tea, and wondering what could have detained his daughter. At last she came in.

"Your walk has done you good, Anna," said he, looking at her bright face. She only smiled, and advanced to the table. After the meal, she told her father all.

"Well, Anna, he's a noble, true-hearted lad. To no one else would I so willingly give my darling, save he whom our golden-haired sprite has appropriated. But I shall be loath to lose my treasure."

"I will never leave you while you need me, father. Not until you can spare me, will I go, father."

"In that case, darling, you will have to wait a long while, I fear," he said, smiling, but the smile ended in a deep sigh. After a

long pause he said, "you are both very young, Annabel."

"Young? Why, father dearest, I am nearly a year older than Olive, when she was married? and Bruce is nearly twenty-two."

Which remark being unanswerable, Mr. Heath only smiled and smoothed the dark head, leaning against his shoulder.

The next year passed quickly by; Ida's long patience and devotion to her aunt had been rewarded by a prolonged sojourn in France, with her relations and friends accompanying her. At Christmas they all met at Olive's home to celebrate the christening of a blue-eyed little cherub, named Emmeline, after the long-lost grandmother.

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In the early summer there was another wedding at Westbourne, when Ida and Dr. Malcolm were united. Miss Malcolm was to live with Aunt Marianne.

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Two years after Bruce and Annabel were

quietly married. This time there were no gay dresses, no merry guests; Mr. Heath's face, so pale and thin, was the explanation; he knew he had no time to lose, if he desired to see his daughter united to Bruce. Not long to live? Aye, a sad wedding that. They went to the Rectory for the breakfast, after which the bride and bridegroom left to go for a week or two to a neighbouring watering-place, Annabel refusing to be parted from her father. Those left behind sadly wondered if the good, kind-hearted man would come back to his parish ere he must leave it for ever! But it was permitted to them to see him again; he, also, seemed so much better, that, as Annabel reigned in her old home a bride, she began to entertain hopes of his recovery. He lingered on into early winter. One afternoon he preached for the first time since many weeks, and the last for aye. As his text he chose the words—"Thou shalt see my face no more;" saying, in conclusion, a few tender words to his flock.

The blessing, given with uplifted hands and trembling tones, and the grey head fell on

the pillow. A silent, momentous pause ensued, the look of wistful sorrow, on the tearful faces, changed to one of alarm, and then Annabel, Bruce, and Dr. Malcolm arose, the latter ascended the pulpit stairs, and tenderly raised the fallen head, and, as the yellow light from the little casement flooded the white face, they knew their pastor was stricken for death! They bore him home, and laid him on his bed, and, as the night fell, he passed away, holding a hand of Annabel and her husband; his last wistful glance wandering from his face to hers; his last words being—"Your mother—in heaven, Annabel!" An universal grief fell on that quiet village. To the Thruxtons, it was as the loss of a dear father. The crowds that stood around that grave, but a week after, testified to the loss of a good, single-minded, loving-hearted minister of God! One by one they silently left the churchyard, and left him to his long rest, with the wintry sunshine on his grave, and the pale flowers strewed over the bare, heaped earth. Alas! poor Annabel!

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Six months afterwards a group of well-known faces stood on a pier, watching a steamer cast off her moorings, preparatory to her departure for foreign lands. On deck stands Annabel, her fingers nervously clasping her husband's arm. The last words were said, the embraces had been exchanged with the dear ones on shore, and now the boat plunges into the foaming, heaving waves, and they have left their native shore. When to return? How many years must pass ere the wanderers could return?





CHAPTER VI.

NEARLY six years have gone their way since last the curtain fell, and we will now look at Olive's Twickenham home. It is a lovely villa, with verdant lawns sloping down to the river. A lady is sitting in a low garden chair, under the shade of a graceful tree; she is surrounded by a little cluster of children; in her we recognise Olive. She looks well and happy; her nearly ten years and a half of married life have been very happy ones. Her cheeks have a colour; her smile a brightness that her earlier years lacked; her hair, golden as ever, is looped over a jet comb; her dress is daintily arranged.

Leaning against her knee is her boy Arnold—a lovely child of seven years, with glossy

curls and lustrous dark eyes. He is reading aloud from some story book ; listening attentively is a little girl, between eight and nine years, whose hair and eyes are the counterpart of her mother's, save for her blindness. She is industriously working at a sampler. On the grass a rosy, dark-eyed baby girl of two, named Olive, plays with a daisy-chain at her mother's feet. Down the grassy slope, from the house, comes a youthful-looking, bright-eyed woman ; her rippling waves of yellow hair seem to defy their confinement under the slender comb. At her approach the boy flings aside his book with a joyous shout of " Auntie Rosie ! " and rushes to meet her. Emmeline lays aside her needlework to greet her with a sunshining, gentle warmth of manner which reminds one of the lady's own way ; even the little one toddles to meet her, and Olive turns with a beaming smile of welcome. Rosabella, for she it is, lifts little Olive in her arms, stills Arnold's noisy glee, and smooths Emmeline's soft tresses. Then, sitting down on a low chair, draws it to her sister's side.

"How did you leave Ida, dear?" asks Olive.

"Oh, as blooming, and even gayer than usual. She will come to see you soon."

"And Hugh," interrupts Arnold, "is he coming too?"

"Yes, Arny, if you will be good to him, and not tease him. How have you got on without me all this while, Ollie? has Arny been good?"

"Of course I have, auntie," he cried, indignantly, "did not I promise you? Papa says promises must always be kept." He drew himself up proudly for one moment; the next he dashed away to the river side, and flung biscuits to the swans sailing past, their white plumage looking almost dazzling in the sunlight.

"Yes," said Mrs. Courtland, "they have all been good children, but both they and I missed our Rosie, and are so glad to have her back again. But your little visit to our sister has benefited you. Emmie, run and fetch auntie's letter for her, dear."

The child soon returned with the foreign-

looking missive, which Rosabella eagerly opened and read, exclaiming, in a few moments—

“It is from Annabel. Oh, Olive they are coming home!”

* * * * *

Such was Rosabella's position in her sister's home, where she was loved and trusted beyond measure; and she deserved that love and confidence, for with unselfish, unostentatious affection had she clung to her sister all these years. Olive felt her life owed its almost perfect peace to her sister in a great measure, for she was eyes and hands to her. Had she never been sought for a home of her own? Yes, seven years before she was wooed by a noble, single-minded man; but, in spite of the grief it cost her, she refused his offer. How could she forsake Olive and her little ones? No one could really supply her place in that home, so effectually prevent Arnold from feeling the want of sight in his poor young wife. Must she sacrifice their happiness or her own? There was no hesitation;

it must be done. Simply and feelingly the sacrifice was made, "It was her duty to stay with Olive."

She hid her sorrow, and strove to minister to others' joy. Olive noticed her quietude, and wondered at the plaintive ring in the clear voice, and feared she was ill. But Arnold guessed nearer the truth. Alan Beckford's departure was simultaneous with Rosa's flagging spirits; he treated her with anxious tenderness. But after a time she got over the wrench a little, growing peacefully happy in giving others joy.

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At Christmas, all assembled at Ida's house in London—for Dr. Malcolm, unwilling to seclude his bright young wife in the country, had migrated thither. The dusk had begun to fall on Christmas Eve when a cab rattled to the door. Soon after, a familiar voice reached Rosabella's ear. Running downstairs, she left the others wondering at her conduct, but presently the wonder clears away; she re-enters the room, leaning on a tall, pale,

bright-haired man's arm, followed by a gentle-faced woman, leading a little boy in either hand.

Bruce and Annabel came home in time for Christmas, to take a year or two's rest, ere returning to their labours in foreign lands. There were gay doings at the Twickenham home when all the family were gathered, for it was the birth-day of the twin sisters. There had been a children's party in the garden that afternoon, but now all had retired to their rooms to dress for dinner.

Rosabella stood at her window, gazing over the sunny lawn to the gleaming river, but seeing naught ; her games with the little ones had wearied her, and her heart was weary too.

She and Olive were now thirty years old ; how different was their lot ; the one a happy wife and blessed mother, the other, as she said to herself, with a half-smile, "an old maid."

And Alan Beckford, where was he ? Still wandering in foreign lands ? Checking her rebellious thoughts, she knelt before the

open window, and prayed once more her oft-repeated petition that he might be happy. She had just finished her toilet of delicate green and white (her old colours), and was fastening a spray of white roses in her hair, when her little niece entered.

“Oh, auntie, how pretty you look, and so young.” Somehow this compliment pleased Rosabella. “Will you come and arrange mamma’s jewels, dear auntie?”

Rosa complied with this request, and was busied in adjusting her sister’s beautiful sapphires; when Arnold came into the dressing room, he nodded approvingly at his sister-in-law, saying—

“By-the-by, Rosie, I expect another guest. I met in town, this morning, Mr. Alan Beckford. After some years wandering, he has returned to England, intending to set up as author, and to write a book of his adventures as a commencement.”

Thus spoke Arnold, affecting not to see the burning blush, and quickly succeeding pallor, on the face he was all the time so keenly studying. Olive felt the trembling of the

fingers that were clasping her bracelets, and heard the quivering, almost sobbing, breath.

“Rosa, you are ill; over-tired. Sit down,” she said.

Her sister obeyed her, and, for a few moments, strove to restrain her hysterical weeping. Olive was much alarmed, but when Rosabella went away, declaring herself recovered, to direct the servants to lay for another guest, her husband gave her a hint as to how he thought matters were. All were assembled in the drawing-room, when Rosabella, not daring to look up, entered slowly.

“Mr. Beckford, Miss Thruxton,” said Arnold’s voice, and she felt a strong hand clasp her trembling fingers, and, glancing up, met the searching glance of the keen blue eyes she remembered so well.

Later on, at the dinner table, she summoned courage to look at him. He was altered, certainly, looking older, and, although its smile had lost none of its cheerful geniality, yet his face was that of a man who had met with and endured a great

sorrow. At last she saw him again, but that was all ; she knew nought about him ; was he married, or not ? happy, or not ?

Late that same evening, he approached her as she stood watching the silvery waves, and again repeated the petition she had refused long years before.

“Rosabella, I love you still ; will you again say me nay ? ”

One moment of bitter temptation, and then—

“Yes, Alan ; once more it is impossible, now as then ! ”

“Rosa, Rosa ! hear me. It is wrong to wreck both our lives again, for I feel you love me. Your little niece can help her mother.”

“I will not lay the burden on a little child,” she answered.

He left her, and she felt a wild desire to plunge into the rippling river, and end for ever her struggle between love and duty.

“Auntie (Arny stood by her) Emmie says she thinks that gentleman wants to take you away, but you won’t leave us, will you ? ”

“Never Arnold,” she cried, flinging her arms round him, and kissing him with a passionate fervour that astonished the little lad.

* * * * *

That evening, Olive stole into her sister's room, pale and anxious. As she stood there so white and still, her long hair falling over her shoulders, Rosa's thoughts went back to the old days, when, just in the same way, Olive had come to be cheered and comforted.

“Can I do anything, darling?” she asked, feeling that if her bitter sacrifice secured her sister's happiness, she would be rewarded. Olive kissed her once or twice very tenderly, but did not speak. “What is it, Ollie?”

Olive, bursting into tears, said huskily—

“Rosabella, I little knew what I had cost you. I have been very selfish, Rosa; blind in spirit as in body; but it was not intentionally, God knows! Dear sister, why did you let me wreck your life's chief happiness?”

“You did not, Olive; it was my own free choice and will,” replied Rosa, nervously

moving the books on the table by which she stood. "Come Olive," she added, "do not weep so. I have been very happy with you and your dear children. Who has vexed you thus? I thought no one knew my secret."

"Why am I blind?" moaned Olive, "why did I marry? Better to have died of a broken heart, than to have caused you such grief. I never dreamt of it Rosie, but Arnold told me his suspicions of old to-night; he should have told me then; it has almost led to our first quarrel in our married life," (smiling faintly) "but he could do naught, he said."

"No, lovey," was the quiet reply, "I know he could not, he was very kind."

"Now you are tired, go to bed. It does no good talking about what is past for ever; he will never ask me more; I refused him to-night, and should again to-morrow."

"And yet you love him, Rosa?"

"Love him!" the words were a low, passionate cry, but Olive's face grew bright and eager.

"Olive, do go; I feel I cannot bear that one sore point touched."

"Let me heal it; let me pour balm on the wound, dearest sister; let me, who have caused you such a noble-hearted sacrifice, make amends. We owe you a debt we can never pay, Rosa. I know how much our happiness has been promoted by you. I think that in my blindness, I never could have managed home and children aright. Oh, Rosie, Rosie, there are no words in the most learned lexicon in the whole wide world, to tell you our gratitude, mine and my husband's. From my childhood have you cheered, tended, and comforted me. In the old, old time, when I doubted Arnold's love, what a blessing you were to me."

A flood of sunshiny, rainbow-hued, sweet pleasure stole into Rosa's heart, and stilled its throbbing pulses; she had made her sacrifice so simply, and devoted herself to her sister with such a single-minded devotion all her life, that she never thought of "how much they owed her." She did not know that in her simple way, she was a

heroine in the truest sense, always placing duty before all else. Still it was a very sweet and healing draught Olive held to her parched lips.

“Your gratitude is very dear to me; show it by letting me stay with you, always.”

“After the visitors were gone to-night, Alan Beckford sought us, told us all, and begged our intervention. To-morrow he comes for your final decision, which we are determined shall be propitious. Arnold and I have already settled that you shall live at the old home with poor old Auntie, and Miss Malcolm will come to us, no doubt, for a while. So Rosie, all is settled without your consent; when shall the wedding take place?” she added mischievously.

“Stop, my breath seems gone; I do not understand it; what a funny thing to do, but I will not leave you, the case is unaltered.”

Olive looked deeply pained.

“Don’t say that Rosa, the case is entirely different; Arnold and I could never feel happy again, if you refused to make yourself and Mr. Beckford happy, and the good Miss



Malcolm will come to us. He also deserves consideration, he has suffered."

"I never thought but that he would forget me."

"You deserve Bruce's old name for you dear, 'Sweet Humility.'"

"Do you really think I may say yes, Olive?"

"It must be nothing else."

"But I feel as though I were deserting my post."

"No, Rosie, not so, but you are like a faithful soldier, who has stood by his post, till the order comes that he is promoted to a higher duty. Why, Rosie, I should have thought you would have had more respect for duty, which seems to have as much attraction for you as for the 'Iron Duke,' you must be called the 'Iron Maiden,' the 'Golden Comforter,' or rather our 'Ministering Angel.'"

Left alone, Rosa went to the window; kneeling down she rested her head on the sill. She felt confused; joy and sorrow mingled together. After earnest thanksgiving and prayer, she felt more composed;

clearly it was as Olive had said, "Her joyful duty to go up higher." The lawn lay bathed in moonlight, the trees waved in the breeze, the ripple of the waves reached her ; a glory seemed over all ; she remained there till the stars faded and the moon paled, and a cool wind sprang up, rustled the leaves sharply, and ruffled the placid waters ; morning would soon come. Rising, she retired with a calmed and thankful heart to rest.

When she awoke the sun was shining brilliantly, children's voices reached her from below ; what had happened ? a vague feeling of excitement and joy was at her heart. Suddenly all flashed on her memory ; turning her face to the pillow, hot, gushing, happy tears broke forth, and a thrill of intense pleasure ran through her whole being.

That morning the others were out, leaving her with the little ones, whom she patiently amused, while time crept by for herself. By-and-by the children went out with their nurses ; left alone, Rosabella tried to work, then to read ; then to play over some new music. The morning wore on ; soon the

rest would return to lunch, and no Alan came. Was the cup of joy she had but just tasted to be snatched from her lips ?

“ A gentleman to see you, Miss.”

She looked up, Alan Beckford was entering ; the blood coursed rapidly through her veins, with suffocating speed ; she rose and strove to speak, but could not. The first thing she heard clearly were the words—

“ I have been delayed, Rosabella.”

They seemed to cut a way through the mists enveloping her ; she looked at him with clear, frank eyes.

“ Have you forgiven the suffering I have caused you ? ”

“ Dear Rosabella, I but love you the more for your noble love towards your blind sister.”

* * * * *

One soft sunshiny evening in August, a family party was assembled in the drawing-room of Olive's home ; it was the eve of Rosabella's wedding day. All was satisfactorily arranged ; Miss Malcolm was pleased to come and take charge of Olive's children ;

it was a pleasant change from her somewhat dull life with "Aunt Marianne," and the latter was glad to have her favourite niece under the home-roof once more, to cherish her in her old age. Rosabella sat a little apart from the merry party, by her favourite window, for once in her life idle, her hands listlessly folded in her lap. After all, in the midst of her almost perfect joy, it was hard to sever for ever the special link between herself and Olive; the latter's dependence on her. Henceforth others would watch over her; Miss Malcolm or Ida would be nearer to her. Presently Arny came up to her, and putting his hands behind him, looked searchingly at her.

"Ah, auntie, you said you would never leave us."

Rosa's face flushed, she looked distressed, but Alan, who had just approached them, said smilingly—

"Ladies are privileged to change their minds, don't you know that, young man?"

"Oh, but Aunt Rosie is not in the habit of changing hers."

“ Well, I’m very glad she has in this case.”

“ I’m not,” said the little boy, stoutly ; “ we shall miss her so much. What will mamma do without her ? ”

Rosa’s eyes filled with tears ; but here Arnold’s hands descended on his boy’s shoulders, and bore him away to a distant corner of the room. Sitting down, he held Army before him, looking thoughtfully into his laughing eyes.

“ Arnold, my son, never more vex Aunt Rosa by repeating those words to her. Mamma has a kind friend to help her. Words cannot express what ‘ Auntie Rosie,’ has done for her and myself, and you children. Years ago Mr. Beckford wanted her to marry him, and she would not, although she loved him very, very much, because she would not leave you and mamma. It was when you were a baby.”

“ What a long time ago,” said Army, widely opening his eyes at allusion to so remote a period of time. Arnold smiled, and smoothing his curls, went on—

“ Yes, it is a long time. Now, my child,

you see how grateful we must all be to Aunt Rosabella. Poor mamma being blind, could not have done so well without her help."

Here Army looked still more surprised, for the children were not used to hear their mother's affliction spoken of as a misfortune.

"I will be a good boy," he said, his lip quivering, "and always be thankful to dear Auntie Rosie, and to God for giving her to us." By-and-by Rosa found Army by her side, gazing at her with great, dark, thoughtful eyes.

"What is it now, dearie?" asked she.
"What are you musing about?"

"What a good auntie you are," he replied, hiding his face against her shoulder, to conceal his tearful eyes. "Papa has been telling me all about it. I love you so."

She drew him to her knee, kissing him tenderly, for this little nephew was very dear to her. Emmeline came up to them, holding a wax doll, which she regarded thoughtfully and soberly.

"Auntie, I want to dress Penny like a bride, and I don't know the way."



“Well, Emmy, run upstairs to my room; in a drawer you will see a piece of silk, like my wedding dress, bring it to me. We will go to the May tree; I will dress it for you.”

“Thank you, dear auntie!” (with a rapturous kiss).

Later in the evening, Alan, seeking for Rosabella, discovered them in the field, beyond the river; pausing on the bridge, he admired the pretty tableau. Rosa’s pretty summer’s robe flowed over the green turf; her hair was shadowed by the drooping tree; her nimble fingers stitched rapidly at the doll’s dress; Arny leant one arm on her knee; a straggling ray of lingering sunlight fell across his rich curls, and on his sister’s bent, golden head. Alan was soon discovered by Arny’s keen eyes. He then approached, and, laying his hand on Emmeline’s, said—

“Come, petite, nursie is looking for you—you will have a long day to-morrow.”

After a clinging embrace to Aunt Rosa, the children went away, Arny stopping on the bridge for one mischievous sally.

“Ah! Mr. Beckford, I shall call you ‘Uncle Alan’ soon!”

Alan laughed, and, turning to Rosabella, who stood still working beside him, said—

“I feel more and more what a treasure you have been to your sister’s little ones.”

She smiled, looking over the river at the flying sprites.

“Dear children! They have been a treasure and solace to me.”

Alan said, with half a sigh—

“Rosa, you are too good and noble for me.”

“Nay, Alan,” clasping her hands on his arm, “you are a flatterer—I am not worthy of my great happiness,” and her meek eyes filled with soft tears.





CHAPTER VII.

NEVER dawned a fairer morn than Rosa's bridal-day. It was a cool, fresh morning; the dew hung on flower and foliage; a slight haze over the distance foretold heat. Rosa stayed in her room till they came to robe her, when she was discovered placidly finishing Emmie's doll dress. Ida laughed, but Olive whispered to herself—"To the last moment doing something for my darlings." The chief bridesmaid was Emmeline, who, accompanied by her brother, headed the procession, followed by Hugh and his little sister, a dark-eyed, rosy-cheeked child. Hugh was like his bright mother, who, beautiful as ever, excited much admiration from the spectators. Dearly did Ida love her somewhat homely little daughter, for she resembled her beloved husband.

Merrily the bells chimed that blissful day ; cheerily smiled the happy guests ; serenely glad was the bridegroom, and the sweet bride. The knowledge of the loving devotion of Olive and her children seemed to her one of the richest jewels that had adorned her cup of joy.

Some years after a family party was gathered at the old Westbourne home. Sitting at the window of the dining-room was Olive, knitting ; her full lids concealed her sightless eyes ; by her is Emmeline, now a lovely girl of fifteen. She is her mother's right hand and bright sympathetic companion. In another part of the room Alan Beckford is sitting in a low chair—two little children clinging to him, for they always seek him out. One is little Olive ; the other his youngest child, Rosabella, the younger, who has his own honest eyes, and chestnut hair. Some little distance off is Annabel, her sweet face bearing its old gentle look. Her dark hair smoothed away beneath the snowy folds of her widow's cap ; for, alas, brave, sunny Bruce lies buried by the side of her youngest

boy, beneath the palm tree's shade. The gallant, humble labourer is at rest, worn out by the heat and burden of the day. Anna's heart aches at the thought as she thinks of her lame, bright-faced husband, and sunny-haired boy. Two years have past since Bruce died; she and her eldest son have come home to the old village, where she has taken a little house. Before her stands another Bruce, whose yellow curls and blue eyes have won her heart, for their likeness to her dear lost one's—it is Olive's youngest child. In the farther window stands her own boy, close by his guardian's (Dr. Malcolm) side. The latter loves the earnest-eyed, slight-framed lad; and Heath has found a kind, fatherly friend in him. Heath will be a missionary some day, for he considers his father's life a glorious example; and Annabel, though with tears, will bid him go. The others of the little coterie are Arnold, still handsomer than of yore, and deeper, and tenderer in spirit, and Ida, brilliant as of old. Has no cloud touched her? Yes, there is a little grave, where sleeps her dark-eyed child.

She talks gaily with Arnold and Hugh, but the latter knows how, under all her brightness, lies always a tender memory, round which hovers a rainbow-light, formed by the sunshine of a trustful heart, shining on the tears grief has called forth. Before the fireplace stands gentle Rosabella, looking as pretty and merry as usual, though somewhat more matronly than she did twenty years before, when first began Olive's trials and joys, and her own experience of life's fuller interest, as one puts away boyhood or girlhood and enters into the battle of life. To one arm clings Arny, with his ever increasing devotion to "Aunt Rosa;" on the other hangs her own Alan, whose eyes are like her own sweet, calm orbs, and whose nature is her own glad, tender, gentle one. She is perfectly happy; hers is a quiet, contented spirit; still her first thought is for other's welfare. Her aunt sleeps in the churchyard; Miss Malcolm is staying for the present with Mrs. Courtland, now grown old and infirm. Rosabella's heart is even larger; her sympathies keener than in the old days when she

was the home sunbeam. With thankful soul she traces how they have all been led through their various trials into peaceful, sunshiny havens, where, if storms do come, they are met with the hopeful, meek spirit of true religion, which the elder ones have learned, and which they endeavour to teach the younger. Her keenest grief is Bruce's loss, her greatest sympathy for Annabel, but even this is gilded by the sunshine which always lingered round her brother while living, and which surrounds his memory. And Annabel, full well she knows the consolation of these words, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." Indeed, they all have learnt that—

"Our souls renew their youth with years,
And love looks into Heaven through tears."





LADY MINNA.

"A rosebud set with little wilful thorns,
As sweet as English air could make her, she."
TENNYSON.

PART FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

ERMYNTRUDE.

IT was Sunday : a clear, cold, bright winter's afternoon. The old village lay bathed in yellow sunlight ; the people thronged in cosily chatting groups to the church. Leaning against the rails was a young lad of some nineteen summers. He

was tall and slight, with a keen, clearly-cut face, and grey eyes and thick curling chestnut brown hair—a face that had a great deal of power in it and promise of manly beauty. He was an orphan, friendless and poor, an artist. His name was Paul Devereux; as he leant listlessly against the rail, two of the village girls passed him, and he overheard one of them remark—

“That’s the stranger artist; he should see our Lady Minna’s bonnie face. He would not wish a prettier one to put in a picture.”

“Oh, no,” rejoined the other; “our bonnie Lady Minna, with her bright hair and blue eyes.”

“Our bonnie Lady Minna.” Paul Devereux looked curiously after them; who was she? He went into the church, and seating himself on a bench near the pulpit, gazed at the quaint old building with its high black oaken pews and its heavy beamed roof and little organ with its heavy gilding; there was one pew, large and crimson-lined. Surely Lady Minna would sit there if she came; if so, he would see her plainly, for there was no

pew between it and his bench. He then looked at the pretty little faces peeping over the Rector's pew. Again glancing down the aisle, he saw an old man and maiden advancing. The girl had a face of wondrously witching beauty, a skin of the fairest hue, with a soft rose tinge, eyes of the brightest Norman blue, and delicate, aristocratic features. Her hair, cut square over the full white brow, fell over her shoulders like ripples of golden light. She wore a dress and jacket of black velvet, trimmed with ermine, a tippet and muff of the same, and a little hat of velvet and ermine; her face looked bright and gay, the eyes unshadowed by any care, the pretty lips seemed half smiling; one daintily gloved hand rested on her father's arm. Such was our bonnie Lady Minna, properly Lady Ermyntude Delamaine, the fifteen-year-old daughter of the Earl of Chesholm. He was a grand, stately-looking man, with silver hair and fine blue eyes. They entered the crimson-lined pew, and Paul Devereux's artist eyes beheld the bright lady of the village; was there ever such a lovely, wilful sweet face?—the

dancing eyes and smiling mouth just sobered with "Sabbath peace."

After service Paul hastened to the gate, and waited for the arrival of the father and daughter. They came slowly down the path, the villagers bobbing and curtseying, Lady Minna smiling and nodding, her face a perfect sunbeam. They entered their cosy carriage, and were whirled away.

"Who is that?" asked Paul of a bystander.

The man opened his eyes wide.

"Dinno' ye know; why, sir, 'tis our Lady Minna. God bless her sweet face."

The next morning Paul was sketching, wrapped in his warm dark cloak, on the top of a bleak brow, when there came the clatter of horses' footsteps. The next moment Lady Minna came into view, mounted on her shaggy Shetland pony, the staid old groom behind. Paul ceased from his employment, and looked up. When she reached him, she stopped her pony, and leapt lightly off; ere Paul, who had sprang up to assist her, could reach her side, she stood by him, looking merry and wilful. The groom, evidently accustomed to

his will-o'-the-wisp lady, calmly dismounted, and led back the pony from the grass he had ambled to.

Paul stood surprised. She said, looking at him with her frank blue eyes—

“You are the artist I heard was in the village. May I look at your sketch?”

He bowed, and the little lady looked eagerly at it for a few moments, and then exclaimed, clapping her little gauntleted hands together—

“How lovely. It is perfect; just like that dear hill, and the dear old church below, and our park trees in the distance; and 'tis so beautifully done.”

“I am glad you like it, my lady,” said he, gravely.

“Oh, yes, I do like it so much.” Then after a pause, “I should like you to take our house and some sketches of the grounds. Are you busy?”

“No; quite at your service,” with a bow.

“Then that's right,” clapping her hands. “I will ask papa, when he returns this evening. That's if you would like it,” with a sudden shy glance at Paul.

“Yes, certainly I should, your ladyship,” said Paul, eagerly.

“How do you know I am your ladyship?” she said, laughing.

Paul answered—

“I heard you called Lady Minna yesterday.”

“Yes, that’s what I like to be called; the dear poor people gave me that name. Properly, I am Ermyntrude Delamaine.” Then turning away, she said, “Good morning. I won’t forget to ask papa’s permission.”

Paul hastened to give her the assistance she so little needed, and as she gathered the reins in her hands, she said, with a half shy, half mischievous face—

“What is your name? I ask because I shan’t know what to call you to papa.”

“Paul Devereux,” said he, raising his hat.

“Paul Devereux,” repeated she. “Are you of Norman descent, too?”

“I don’t know,” said Paul, flushing, “but we are of a good family, I believe. But I’m in the world alone. Ah, alone.”

“I pity you,” and the clear eyes softened almost to tears.

Then giving her pony a touch with the whip (whose jewelled handle flashed in the sunlight) she waved him good-by, with a smile. So they rode away, the groom looking slightly scandalised at his young mistress's proceedings, and she serenely unconscious of having done anything out of the common. Ermyntrude Delamaine, the petted daughter of an indulgent parent, was quite accustomed to take her own way, and from her pedestal as Lady Minna, quietly passed over ceremonious bands. Paul was left in a state of bewildered admiration, amusement and gratitude.

* * * *

“Ermyntrude, how restless you are to-night. Can you not settle to something? You disturb me so,” and the speaker, a prim lady of doubtful age, looked up querulously from her work.

Ermyntrude paused in her restless pacing up and down the richly-furnished room, and flung herself on her knees by her aunt's side, and looking coaxingly into her vexed face, said—

"Dear auntie, do forgive me, I do so long for papa's return." Lady Mary Delamaine smoothed her niece's golden locks. "Why, Auntie May, I do so long want to ask papa's permission for something."

"For what?" asked the aunt smiling.

"Ah!" said Ermyntrude, springing up, and dancing across the room, "that is a secret for the present."

Just then a carriage rattled to the door, and the next moment her father's voice was heard in the hall, and Ermyntrude opened the door and flew into the corridor, and, flinging her arms round her father's neck, cried—

"Oh, dear papa, here you are at last."

"What is it, Trudie?"

Ermyntrude drew her father into the drawing-room, and holding his hands, plunged eagerly into a recital of her meeting with Paul Devereux. Lady Mary held up her hands in dismay, with a—

"What will you do next, Ermyne?"

That sent Lord Chesholm into a hearty laugh, and caused Ermyne to say—

"Why, auntie dear, there was no harm in it. He is poor and friendless, and I thought papa would like to help him," with a kiss on her father's hand.

"And so he will, dear one."

"I thank you, dearest papa," with a flash of gratitude in her large eyes. "May I send for him to come up now—now don't say no," and she ran from the room to give her order.

"James," began Lady Mary, "you really do spoil Ermyntrode too much."

"Nay Mary, she will not be spoilt."

Thus it came to pass that Paul Devereux received "Lady Minna's" imperious summons to the "Hall." When he arrived, he was ushered into the room where they sat, receiving a merrily, courteous greeting from Ermyntrode, a kind, grave one from the Earl, and the stiffest of bows from Lady Mary.

After some preliminary conversation, it was arranged that he should paint Ermyntrode in the somewhat quaint costume of red and black satin she wore as evening attire. This portrait appeared in the next Exhibition,



and "took" wonderfully; the quaint attire, the lovely face, and half-gay, half-haughty bearing, attracted much admiration. The name of the artist was inquired for, and by degrees Paul grew into some repute. The Earl of Chesholm remained his firm patron, and, still more, learnt to give something of a father's love to the solitary youth, welcoming him to his house at all times. Between his young daughter and Paul grew up a firm, friendly attachment.

Two years passed, and one Christmas Paul was going to stay a little while at Lord Chesholm's mansion, before leaving England for the Continent, where he proposed to study his profession in some of the great art-cities. As he neared the little village station, he felt at once eager and melancholy, for in the same train were a number of "grand" people going to the same house as himself, and perchance Ermytrude would not have time or will for her usual friendly welcome. He glanced quickly over the platform, as the train slowly shunted into the station; yes there was a glimmer of scarlet and gold;

there stood Ermyntrude, in her warm red cloak. As the train stopped, she hurried forward to open the door of his carriage.

“ Oh, Paul, how are you ? I am so glad you have come ; I’ve brought my little pony-chaise, and will drive you home.”

She then hastened with her ready word and welcoming smile, to a stately lady, who, with her party, was awaiting her. The greetings over, a tall, haughty, looking girl asked—

“ Who is that individual in the grey cloak, Ermyne ? you were speaking to him.”

“ Ermyntrude sent a queer, quizzical glance down the platform to the person thus designated ; then said, slowly—

“ That is Paul Devereux, a friend of my father.”

“ Indeed, a friend of Lord Chesholm ! Who is he, pray ? ”

“ He is an artist,” was the short reply ; as Ermyntrude summoned Paul to be presented to her aristocratic guests.

Leading the way to the carriage she stood by while her friends entered it ; then sent the footman for Paul’s luggage.

“Are you not coming with us, Ermyné!”

“No, I am going to drive my ponies, if you will excuse me. Mr. Devereux will accompany me.”

Much disgusted at her preferring the stranger's society to theirs, the occupants of the carriage drove off; but blithe and gay were the owners of the grey and red cloaks. Ermyntrude made Paul take the reins, and gathering her mantle around her, said—

“It is so good to have you here again, you good old Paul. I came back with you, because I fear I shall not have much time to talk to you at home.”

“It is good to be here, Minna,” said he earnestly, “do you know I feared you would discard your plebeian friend before those haughty visitors of yours.”

“I could never forsake an old friend.”

“It is but two years.”

“Only two! I seem to have known you for years, Paul! You are like a brother to me.”

He winced slightly at the word “brother.”

“We shall soon be parted,” resumed Minna sadly.

“ Yes, and for years ! ”

On Christmas morning, Paul entered the breakfast-room early, to place on Emma-trude's plate an exquisite flower-painting; soon she came in.

“ You here, Paul ? I thought I was the first. See, here is papa's gift to me, this beautiful diamond star. Did you put this here ? Oh, many thanks ! Flowers at Christmas are indeed acceptable. Now I will give you my present ; this case of compasses, etc. Think of ‘ Lady Minna,’ when you use them ! ”

After dressing the next evening, Paul went into the library, and seating himself at the broad window-ledge, gazed into the dark twilight, musing sadly of his impending departure from home and Minna. So lost was he in his mournful reverie, that he did not hear the door open, and, turning abstractedly, was surprised to see at the further end of the room a fair, bright vision. The spell was soon broken by a gay voice.

“ Is that you, Paul ? I could not think what dark gnome-like being it was ! ”

"Nor I, what gleaming sprite," he returned. She came to the fireplace.

"Paul, I am grown up, I am in proper evening attire; next season auntie says I am to be presented!" She seemed to have discarded her usual fanciful style and colouring; her dress was at once simpler and richer than in general; pure white silk, golden circlets on arms and neck, the glossy leaved myrtle in her hair, her father's gift gleamed at her throat.

"How quiet you are, Paul? Are you ill?"

"You are so lovely," he said involuntarily.

"Does that make you so mournful?" she laughed.

"Ah, Ermina, in your bright new life you will find so many to admire and love you, that the memory of our friendship will fade like a dream."

The expression of his face puzzled her a moment, she gazed thoughtfully into the fire, then slowly raising her blue eyes, laid her begemmed fingers on his arm, and said earnestly—

“Never fear that ‘Lady Minna’ could forget an old friend for new ones, be they ever so rich and great.”

Some days after Ermyntrude waved farewell to Paul Devereux, as the train speeded out of the station that was carrying him away. He gazed till the last glimmer of gold and blue vanished ; then sinking back in his corner of the carriage gazed blankly, with not very clear sight, at his Bradshaw’s Guide. For years ! And Ermyntrude ? She quite forgot her usual smile, as she passed the old station master, and the way home looked strangely indistinct. Arrived there, she hastened to her room, where she wept bitterly over the loss of her “brother-friend.” Later on the old nurse found her with flushed tear-stained face, and crumpled ringlets, sleeping like a wearied child. She shook her grey head with a half-sage, half-sad expression, as she gazed at her young mistress, then muttered—

“It is best as it is.”

For some days Ermyntrude was quiet

and sad; then came Paul's first letter, over which she cried, and then cheered up. Soon she was absorbed in preparations for her London campaign, amidst silks, laces, and jewels! Poor Paul!





CHAPTER II.

“ Queen of the rosebud, garden of girls,
In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls :
Queen Lily and Rose in one.”

TENNYSON.

IN a luxurious dressing-room stood Ermyntrude Delamaine, fully attired for the Drawing-room. She wore a robe of white silk, with swansdown trimmed train ; the family jewels flashed on neck and arms ; she held a bouquet of white rosebuds. Aunt Mary, resplendent in velvet and pearls, and her father, proud and gratified at his little Trudie's appearance, accompanied her. Many were the admiring glances cast at the bright face at the carriage window, which save for the feathers and diamonds looked so childlike. The presentation was over ; pale and quiet Lady Minna leant back in the carriage as she drove home.

“Are you tired, my darling?”

“Nay, dearest father, but it is all so new, so strange. Such a wonderful bright world.”

Certainly she made a most triumphant *entrée*, and was soon considered the belle of the season; and had obtained at least one admirer in the person of Viscount Eveleigh, a handsome man of six or seven-and-twenty. Paul received a paper, containing an account of her presentation, which, strange to say, did not seem to afford him much satisfaction.

“Lady Ermyntrude Delamaine, daughter of the Earl of Chesholm; presented by her aunt, Lady Mary Delamaine,” seemed so much further off, than “our bonnie Lady Minna.”

The season was over. Ermyne rejoicing in the fact, read placidly one hot afternoon, clad in a simple home-dress, now for the refreshing sea-breezes, then for “home sweet home.” The little lady had refused two offers; both everything to be desired in a worldly sense.

“Viscount Eveleigh,” is announced somewhat to her surprise; rising she says nervously—

“My aunt is from home.” But soon she hears words which half-please, half-trouble her; between Lord Eveleigh’s face and her own eyes she seems to see Paul Devereux’s. How is it the violet orbs, with their passionate pleading, seem less trustworthy in expression, than those open grey ones? She cannot give her decision then, will he grant her time?

Three days after, a group of four persons left London for Eastbourne; one was Viscount Eveleigh, the others, three familiar forms. Emyntrude’s reply was propitious, then? Witness Lord Chesholm’s loving pride; Lady Mary’s complacent satisfaction, and the buoyant air of Cecil Eveleigh himself. Ermyne herself looks pale, and more womanly than at the commencement of the season, but, yet, calm and happy. The sweet childlikeness of her expression is deepening into a composed earnestness that gives a dignity to her winsome face. Poor Paul!

PAUL.

“ Is it well to wish thee happy ?
Having known me to decline, on a range of feelings lower,
And a narrower heart than mine ? ”

TENNYSON.

On the shore of an Italian watering-place sat Paul Devereux opening a letter in Minna's writing. But why turns his cheek so pale ? In the well-known round, almost childish handwriting he reads—

“ You will be surprised at my news, Paul ; I am to be married to Viscount Eveleigh, but not till I am twenty, papa thinks me too young. Auntie considers that I have had a very successful season.”

Poor Paul ! “ A successful season.” Yet what right had he to complain ? It was his own fault ; the fault of his own foolish love. Yet his heart grew bitter, his head sunk on his hands ; the cruel, frank, friendly letter, fluttered to the ground, where it lay so white and innocent-looking after having crushed the heart of the proud, sensitive loving youth. He sat thus a long time ; when he looked up he saw that the clouds were black, the sea,

grey and leaden, heaving restlessly before the coming storm, splashing sullenly on the sands. So had his life been changed from bright, hopeful energy, to dull despair. He arose ; picked up the letter, and wandered along the coast ; the rain fell in heavy showers ; the lightning flashed above the rocks ; the wind roared, thunder crashed, yet he noticed it not. Why should he feel thus ; had he ever breathed a syllable of the love that had grown out of his brotherly friendship, and if he had, what would it have availed ? Nought. In his wildest moments, could he dream that he the poor, almost penniless artist, could wed the Earl of Chesholm's heiress ?

When late that evening he returned to his lodgings, he felt weary, sick, and feverish in body and soul. A severe illness was the result of this blow to his hopes, and the exposure he had undergone to the weather. Meanwhile unconscious Ermyntrode wondered why Paul did not answer her letter ; at last, late in the winter, came a note in feeble, shaky writing, telling her he was only just

recovered from a dangerous illness. He congratulated her on her good fortune. Ermyntrude shed tears over this letter; and sent back another full of compassionate regard and sympathy for her adopted brother.

In the spring came the answer, as she was preparing for her second season.

“He was better and was going back to Rome to resume his studies, and though unspeakably grateful to her father and herself, for their great kindness, he hoped they would forgive if he said that he would rather cease their correspondence; his homesick heart would be better, if he were not reminded too poignantly of happier days.”

Poor Minna wept still more over this, but quieted her father's indignation at what he called “Paul's ingratitude,” and acceded to the proposal. Perchance she dimly guessed the truth. So each one went their different ways. Paul worked hard to drown thought while Lady Minna went through her second season in London, with even more *éclat* than the first, and in all the loveliness and gay strength of her eighteen years.

AFTER EIGHT YEARS.

Let us look in at Paul Devereux's studio. It is a good-sized, cosy room, with a large window overlooking the sunny reaches of the Roman Campagna, well-furnished with numerous antique ornaments, and curiosities that bespeak the artist. Pictures adorn the walls, and are scattered here and there about the room; a large easel stands in the corner by the window, supporting a newly-finished picture. Paul has not wasted his time. The door opens, and the owner enters with a quick step, and business-like air and cheerful glance. He lays a picture on the table, and flinging off his hat and coat, turns to the window, looking forth on the lovely, dreamy landscape. Eight years have made him a man of nine-and-twenty; grave, thoughtful, kindly; with a touch of melancholy on the wide brow and in the depths of his clear, grey eyes. His hair is darker, still clustering in rich curls over his massive forehead; he wears a moustache, and closely trimmed whiskers. His early disappointment

has not soured his heart, although it has given his face a certain wistful gravity, and rendered the lines of his firm mouth sterner than they would have been if fate had been kinder to him.

As he stands and gazes, a yearning seizes him to go home, home to England; he has exiled himself so long, so long! What has become of Lady Minna? He has heard, nor seen no account of her wedding; is she married or not? Happy, or unhappy? Somehow he cannot imagine her the latter; his bonnie-faced, merry Lady Minna. How tender his heart grows, even after all these years, as he thinks of her "his" Minna; yes, in spite of all efforts, he has not been able to efface, or tear her dear face from his heart. He can bear the silence no longer; he must return, and find her again. How should he find her? And now a cold thrill creeps over him; is she dead? dead! no, no! It cannot be? Yet, this dead silence. He had exiled himself; unable to bear his thoughts he seized his hat and went out. With his usual promptitude, he made some

arrangement for departure ; next week he would be at home again !

About dusk he re-entered his studio ; a figure clad in a dark cloak, and closely veiled, stood before the window, intently regarding the picture on the easel. This picture represented the face of a lovely Greek girl, in early youth. The exquisite face, with its large, soft, dark eyes, delicate pink and white complexion, and the braids of auburn hair, were carefully rendered by a master hand ; the silver collar, white dress, and the white flowers in the bodice, were executed with great delicacy.

Astonished, Paul stopped ; the figure turned towards him, fell at his feet, and the veil falling back, revealed the original of the portrait.

“ Irene ! ” he started back in surprise, “ Irene, you here ? ”

“ Pardon me,” said a soft Greek voice ; “ I longed so to see you ; it is very long since you left Athens.”

“ It is long,” he replied ; “ but Irene, is it wise to come here, and alone ? ”

"My nurse is with me," she replied, the dew gathering on her long lashes.

"Come, don't cry, you foolish child; get up."

He gently raised her, and led her to a seat. She sat silently, her delicate face one rosy flush, the pearl-drops running down her cheeks. Paul leant against the table, looking vexed, and wholly perplexed.

"It is a whole year," she ventured at last.

"Yes," was his brief reply.

"Are you angry I have come?" the tears gathering slowly in her eyes like a child's.

"Yes, for your sake, Irene."

"For mine? I am so glad to see you once more."

Was he not longing to see Minna, even as this poor, silly, ignorant child had longed to see him? His vexation calmed.

"Next week I leave for England."

Her face flushed then paled.

"You will return?"

"I think not. I do not know."

"Take me with you."

"It is impossible."

"Why? Let me be your sister; I have no

brother, no being on earth but old Rhoda ;
I am so lonely."

"Nay, my child, you must return to Athens."

"Why are you going to England?"

He hesitated, then said gravely.

"Listen to me, Irene. Many years ago, when I first left home, and you were but a little child, I loved, aye, and still do love, a fair English lady. But she was above me in rank ; I never told my love. I came abroad. Soon afterwards I received a letter, telling she was betrothed to one in her own station. Since that bitter time I've heard nothing of her. Now I am going to find her again."

"You love, indeed. She does not love you, that fair proud English lady."

He shook his head.

"See Irene, this is she."

She looked up eagerly at the bright face of Minna.

"How beautiful ! How gay !"

"Come, Rhoda will miss you."

She refastened her veil, and moved towards the door ; pausing there, she clasped her hands and looked appealingly at him.

“ Paul, may I go to England to help you in your search ? ”

He shook his head, a sorrowful look on his face ; her large eyes flashed, and then tears dimming their lustre, she opened the door, and was gone.

Three years before, Paul, who was then in Athens, made the acquaintance of Irene and her father ; he painted her portrait, and was always made welcome at their little home ; she was then a lovely, simple girl of sixteen years, child-like and gentle. Soon the old man died, and she was left alone, save for her old nurse. Then she clung to Paul's brotherly kindness, but when the latter left Athens, her painful grief told him that her friendship had turned to love in her passionate untutored heart. He heard nothing more of her till now ; she had come to seek him in Rome, as he was going to seek Lady Minna. As the coach by which he travelled left the city, he caught sight of her veiled figure, and knew that the dark, sorrowful eyes were looking him farewell, so he waved his handkerchief with a kindly smile, heaving

a sigh of relief as the carriage drove on, and Rome was left behind.

Then came the journey on the heaving dashing sea, with the blue sky and darting sea-birds, and the free, fresh breezes rustling the sails. Paul's heart bounded as the Italian shores faded away ; now for home and Minna ; now to see if a quest for the lost dreams of his youth would be useless.

One bright morning he stepped on England's shore again ; yet in spite of the joy in his heart, he felt a sudden pang of loneliness ; no one to greet him ; no friends, no relations, no love, no home, and Minna was, yes, in spite of his delusive hopes, she must be Viscount Eveleigh's wife, and, if not, what then ? Would she care for him, the struggling artist ? Such-like thoughts were surging in his mind as he got into the train, that was to convey him to London, and these lines recurred to him, as he watched the busy cheerful bustling scene—

" What is it to him, that reaps not harvest of his youthful joys,
Tho' the deep heart of existence beat for ever like a boy's."

END OF PART I.



PART SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

“ Oh, but the years brought changes after,
Clouds in the happy skies ;
Care on the lips that curled with laughter,
Tears in the radiant eyes.”

ERMYNTRUDE.



GAIN Paul stood by the churchyard rails as he had done ten years before ; again he hears the drowsy hum of the old organ ; the villagers are at church, Sunday afternoon service. Presently the door opens, and they come forth with slow decorous step. Now comes through the low doorway, a tall, slight figure in black ; the face is strangely familiar ;

the pretty features, and bright hair are well-known, but not the lack-lustre gaze, and sombre robes. Yet it is the same Minna, whom, ten years ago, he had watched come down the very path. Paul stood amazed. Can this grave, nay, stern-faced woman be Minna Delamaine—bonnie Lady Minna? Yes, she and no other; the villagers bow and curtsy, and she returns them a courteous greeting, but the children no longer smile as they pass her, but hasten by with wistful, half-frightened eyes. She notices the stranger by the gate; something there is familiar in his appearance, her eye brightens, she half pauses in her listless step; then, with a sudden smile, moves quickly forward—

“Is it, indeed, Paul Devereux?”

He lifts his hat, a joyful smile on his face. They clasp hands, looking each other in the face, searching for old familiar traits.

“You are the same old friend. I should have known you anywhere,” said she at last.

“And I you,” answered Paul, wondering, at the same time, what there was so different in the familiar face.

She turned and moved through the wicket, the few remaining villagers were looking curiously at the stranger. Turning to a little group, she said—

“You remember Mr. Devereux?”

They shake their heads.

“The artist?” she adds.

“Ah, yes;” the bewildered faces brighten up. The grave handsome youth was not forgotten.

“But you are growed a goodly man,” says an old dame.

Minna laughed, giving Paul one of her old mischievous glances, then they passed on towards home.

“Ah, but our Lady looked like herseln in that brief minute,” an old man remarked, with a knowing glance at the retreating figures.

“You are changed though, Paul,” Ermyntrude remarked, after some moments’ silence, glancing up at the fine, grave face, and stalwart figure.

“I am.”

“And,” she went on, “do you find me much altered ?”

“You look as though you had seen trouble,” said he gravely.

“I have—bitter trouble.”

He glanced at her black dress.

“I choose to wear black,” with a bitter laugh; “’tis not that. You expected to find me a happy bride. Viscountess Eveleigh,” she added, as though those words choked her.

“I did, yet I knew not. I thought to have seen a notice of your wedding. I’ve heard naught of you so long a time. And you are still Lady Minna ?”

“Yes,” with a sigh.

“The silence has been terrible,” he said, after a pause of joy, sympathy, and perplexity.

“It was your own will,” with a questioning look.

He coloured.

“Yes; it was. Your father is living ?”

“Yes, thank God ! Poor Aunt Mary is at rest ; would that I were too.”

Poor Minna. They were now passing up

the avenue, under the great bleak trees, the wind sougning mournfully in the branches.

“Is it not miserable, Paul?”

“It is rather cold,” said Paul, cheerfully squaring his broad shoulders.

“You do me good. You see we call each other Paul and Minna, as of old. We never could be formal. Do you remember the first time I saw you, what an unceremonious child I was?”

“Yes,” with a smile and a sigh, as the merry-faced girl rose before him.

“Ah, those were happy days, now gone for aye,” she added, a little sob in her voice.

“Nay, don’t cry, Minna. See how brightly the stars are coming forth this dusky eve. Here we are at the old familiar door.”

Ermyntrude drew him into the light and heat of the hall.

“Welcome home, dear friend.”

Opening the library door, she led him to an old man, who was dreamily dozing over a large bright fire. Kneeling by the arm-chair, she said—“Paul has come back, dear father.”

“Who is Paul?” replied the aged Earl,

lifting his white head. The wanderer stooped, and taking one withered hand, said—

“ Paul Devereux, Lord Chesholm, the man who owes his success in life to you and yours, and who now implores you to forgive his seeming neglect.”

The old man, shading his eyes with his hands, looked long and searchingly at him.

“ Paul Devereux was a stripling.”

“ But ’tis he ; ’tis the same old Paul,” said Ermyntrude’s eager voice. Paul knelt down to bring his face on a level with the old Earl’s dim eyes.

“ Do you not know me, dear sir ? ” asked he wistfully.

“ Yea, lad, was the sudden, firm reply, “ yea, my own dear lad. Look, Trudie, these are the earnest eyes and curling locks.”

Leaning back in his chair, the old man said dreamily—

“ I always knew he would return,” then turning round suddenly, he said, “ why have you neglected me so long ? ”

“ Forgive me, dear Lord Chesholm, I have never ceased to remember you.”

The aged face again turned towards the leaping flames, and the Earl murmured softly, a smile creeping slowly over his features—

“ Paul has come home.”

With tears in her eyes, his daughter drew Paul away, saying in a low tone—

“ You have done my dear father good already.”

“ Had I only known that he needed me I would have returned ere now.”

As they sat together after dinner that evening, Ermyntrude desired Paul to recount his adventures.

“ I have very few to tell,” he answered with a somewhat sad smile, “ tell me your history.”

“ Not to-night, we will be happy this one night, to-morrow I will tell you all.”

Tears filled her eyes, her mouth trembled. As he walked back to his lodgings that evening (after promising the old Earl to return on the morrow to spend some time with them) he wondered what had changed the blithe spirit of Ermyntrude Delamaine, what terrible grief, what dire agony ?

A SORROWFUL TALE.

This was the tale Ermyntrude told to Paul, as they sat together in the gathering dusk of a stormy afternoon.

“ You know, I was betrothed to Viscount Eveleigh, a rich handsome man, and favoured as such by my Aunt Mary. I, foolish girl, loved him ; I have often wondered since how I could have done so ; my imagination was enthralled, my good sense blinded. My father refused to let us be married before I was twenty. Well, time went on ; ah, those days were pleasant, gay, cheerful times ; as I grew older, I felt the want of something in my admirer’s handsome face, a certain want of strength ; as the wedding-day approached he grew restless and irritable. At last the day arrived ; attired in my wonted splendour (you know how fond I was of dress) I was led to the altar by my dear father ; crowds of guests thronged the chancel. The service had proceeded some way, when a clear, hard voice cried, ‘ I forbid this marriage.’ My heart turned to stone, his face grew pale ; a tall,

dark woman, who must once have been very handsome, stepped forward. Cecil started as though he had seen a ghost. 'I thought you were dead,' fell as if involuntarily from his lips. 'Did you ever seek the proofs of my death?' The clergyman interfered—enough to shorten it, the marriage was proved. I clung to my father's arm in an agony of shame and hurt pride; oh, Paul, what pain I endured; the cynosure of those curious eyes; I fainted, I could bear no more. I awoke in my own room, the blinds were down; my aunt was weeping by my side, my old nurse gazing at me with sorrowful eyes; then came a dreadful illness, I arose from what had so nearly been my death-bed, a mere shadow of my former self. I was taken abroad; two years after we brought dear Aunt Mary home to die. We left again, I could not bear my once dear home, it seemed haunted by the man I now hated and despised. Two years ago, at my father's express wish, we returned; my heart seems dead. Thank God it was in London, not here in my own loved church, the ceremony

was to take place. It seems Lord Eveleigh had married beneath him, treated his wife unkindly, she left him—she left him, he thought her dead, feared to seek proof. The weak, deceitful man, had he but told of his former marriage, what misery I should have escaped.”

Paul gave vent to his bitter, angry, and sympathising emotion.

“His poor wife,” he added, “how she must have suffered.”

“She was a cruel, hard woman.”

“Her sufferings may have rendered her so; and, Ermyntrude, should you not learn to forgive him?”

She drooped her head, and answered not. She had indeed suffered, her bright hopes quenched so suddenly and utterly. On that fatal day, the guests had moved away in groups, after the poor girl had been borne away; all were gone at last, save Lord Eveleigh, who stood with bowed head, and his wife, whose hard eyes had grown dim as she saw Ermyntrude’s grief; now she stole softly to the place where, in all her gay



finery, the bride had stood a short time before. The yellow light streamed down through the painted window over her dark dress and black hair. Cecil, raising his eyes, met her look of pitying, forgiving love ; for a moment his eyes drooped, his face flushed, but then, moving fiercely towards her, his hands clenched, she fell in supplication at his feet—

“ Ah, Cecil, if I had but known it in time, I would have come to you and saved you this, and that poor girl ! ”

“ I hate you.”

She rose, a gleam of scorn in her dark eyes.

“ For long years have I waited (then bursting into tears), Cecil. Cecil do love me a little.”

“ I thought you were dead, I hoped you were.”

“ I went away, I could not bear your coldness ; I hoped perchance you would learn to miss me.”

“ I miss you ! ”

“ Pity me, Cecil, your own true wife.”

He thrust her from him and left the church. She sank on the pavement ; by-and-by she

rose, with her old, weary, hard, defiant look again settling on her face, and quitted the building with lingering step. Poor Vera Eveleigh; but four years and a half before had she been Lord Eveleigh's lovely and loved bride. Her family being much lower than his, his had refused to receive her, and she had displeased her own friends by marrying him. For a little time he was devoted to her, but soon left her much alone, regretting his marriage with one who had neither rank or wealth. Cut to the heart by some bitter words, one day she left him, intending to return if he showed any grief at her departure, but on the contrary he went back into society, and forgot her—believed her dead; met Ermyntrude; captivated by her beauty and wealth, proposed to her. His relations, being assured by him that Vera must be dead, rejoiced at the proposed union. Vera, coming to seek her husband, after three years, was just in time to prevent the marriage. Her poor bruised heart freely yielded Minna the sympathy refused herself.

To return to Paul and Ermyntrude.

When the latter had recovered her composure, she asked Paul for his story. He told her of his life amidst the art circles abroad, and also about poor Irene ; tears filled her eyes.

“ Poor girl, you could not love her ? ”

“ Not as a wife, as a sister very dearly.”

Silence ensued for some time, till Ermyintrude said—

“ Happy Paul, to have had no dreams.”

He replied slowly—

“ Once I cherished a very dear one.”

She looked up curiously.

“ Who was the heroine, if I may ask ? ”

He answered with a sad smile—

“ Her name was ‘ Lady Minna ! ’ Yes, dear Minna,” he added earnestly, rising and taking her hand, “ you were my dream ; my youthful hopes were vain, but now can you care for me ever so little ? Oh, Ermyintrude, let me make up to you for all your trials.”

Her face was one crimson blush, a fresh, fair tint, like the heart of a red rose ; her blue eyes were suffused with tears, and she looked at him with a strange gleaming expression of gratitude and sorrow. How

lovely she looked; her face seemed to have regained its former tenderness; her hair gleamed bright in the gloaming. But the light in her eyes grew dim, the rosy flush faded, her tears fell fast.

“It is impossible, dear friend.”

With an effort he calmed his voice.

“Why impossible, Ermyne?”

“Because, Paul, I would not wrong your kind heart by marrying you without a wife’s deepest love.”

“I only ask a little, Ermyne.”

“No, Paul, I cannot tell you how my heart is warmed by your noble, unselfish love. But I cannot marry you.”

“Oh, Minna, and I have loved you so long; since the days when we were boy and girl. All these years have I striven to forget, but could not.”

“All these years! While I have thought myself so cruelly used by fortune. Paul, I am not worthy such love. I cannot give you the love you merit; but Paul, you will still be my friend?”

“Yes, Minna, now and for ever your true

friend," he replied, striving to press down the pain at his heart.

For the old Earl's sake Paul stayed a few days longer. One cold day Ermyntrode drove him to the station, and, bidding farewell, she said—

"My father will look forward for the summer, when we hope to see you again."

And thus he departed for the great Metropolis, a heavy weight at his heart, but also hope that would rise. And she? She drove home and noted the budding trees, and felt as if a great warm gleam of sunshine had gone, and left her cold and dreary; and murmured, "In the summer."





CHAPTER II.

"Regret is dead, but love is more
Than in the summers that are flown."

TENNYSON.

IN THE SUMMER.

QNE lovely day in June Paul arrived at the Hall. The garden was gay with flowers of every hue; the bees hummed busily, butterflies flitted over the sweet parterres; two peacocks proudly displayed their gorgeous plumes to each other's contemptuous eye. Some pure white doves cooed softly as they walked over the green turf; a large dog thrust its nose into Paul's hand. Through the open door came a gentle-faced woman, who, with a quiet smile of welcome, put her hands in his. Could this be the white, stern Ermyntrode of the gloomy

winter drive. Yes, for the true love of a good man had sunk down into her heart and thawed its icy despair. He saw the change, and rejoiced. That evening, as they stood on the lawn, watching the sunset, he said—

“You are happier, Ermyne?”

“Yes, much. I see now I fed my own sorrow in a great measure. I am happier, and have striven to forgive him. Your kind, sensible words roused me. We have resumed a little of our former visiting. I do not find it so irksome as I thought.”

Paul rejoiced still more; but said not a word.

One sultry evening in July Ermyntrude stood in a lonely part of the grounds, silently weeping. Paul had left them that day, and now that it was too late she knew she had learnt to love him with a deep, absorbing, reverential passion, far, far different from the childish affection she had given Lord Eveleigh. Leaning against a statue, she watched the moon calmly sailing high in the pale blue sky. The stars came out one by one; a nightingale trilled in a neighbouring copse; a thrush

sang its rich belated song in emulation ; a landrail croaked in a near corn-field ; and the cattle lowed peacefully in the meadows stretching out before her in rich green slopes. A sadness and loneliness covered all ; her soul gave no response to Nature's quiet melody. Suddenly a human voice broke the spell with her own name. She started, and turning, saw Paul.

"Are you here ?" she cried, amazed.

"Yes, Minna."

"You have been crying ? Ermyintrude, will you say me nay again ?"

"No," she whispered, "but, yes."

He drew her head to his shoulder.

"Thank God ! Peace, at last, for us both, Minna."

How much they had to say. She won from him a recital of his sorrow and illness. And what music was there now in the peaceful night.

The next morning, when she looked in her mirror, she saw once more "Lady Minna's" bonnie face. Clad in a pale blue dress she descended to the breakfast-room.

“Trudie, you look like old times?” asked her father.

Kneeling by his chair, she told him all. He was only too rejoiced to have his daughter's happiness restored; to think of Paul's want of rank—“Did not his perfect nobility of nature outweigh all?” The wedding was arranged to take place in September.

One day Ermyntrude, in passing through a corn-field with golden wheat on either side, came upon a girl, lying on a bank gay with poppies and cornflowers. Stooping down, she touched her shoulder—

“Are you ill?”

A pale face, with large mournful eyes, was raised to hers, and a voice said in soft tones, “I am weary, lady.”

Irene, for she it was, looked curiously at the fair face and muslin robe. “You are his love,” she cried, suddenly rising.

Ermyntrude looked astonished, and rather alarmed.

The girl said, with a sad smile, “I am Irene; you are Paul Devereux's love.”

“Irene, how came you here?” asked Minna in the same language.

"I have come to see if his quest be successful."

"Have you seen him?"

"No, lady (shrinking back); he would be so vexed. And—you are angry?"

"Nay, poor Irene. Come with me."

"Are you going to marry him?" (her dark eyes flashing).

"Yes. I have suffered much, but now his love makes amends for all."

The Greek girl's eyes glowed fiercely for a moment, then suddenly softened. "You have suffered" (wistfully).

Ermyntrode gave her the outline of her history.

"I should have killed him," said Irene, drawing forth a small jewelled dagger.

In alarm, Ermyntrode started back; with a sad smile the other replaced it in her belt.

"Lady, think you I would hurt what he loves?"

"Pardon me."

Irene raised one hand, holding it against the sun's rays. "See, lady, how thin my hand is; how pale my face. Soon I shall rest peacefully beneath the murmuring trees. I

longed to see Paul once more before I died, or I would not have come. You will not be angry, lady? Your future lies bright as yon sun before you; mine is very short, bounded by a grave, over which but one mourner will weep."

Ermyntrude's tears fell fast.

"Do not weep, the grave will be but rest."

"What ails you, Irene?"

"Consumption, dear lady. My mother and a little sister died of it. Do not think it is my hopeless love."

Ermyntrude took her hand, and kissed her cheek.

Irene's face flushed and darkened at first, but then she threw her arms round her and kissed her passionately. "He loves you," was all she said.

After much trouble, Ermyntrude persuaded her to accompany her home. She, after a few days, took her to London and obtained the best advice for her; but all was vain, nothing could be done. Soon Irene grew homesick. She and her old nurse went back, after obtaining a promise that Paul and

Ermyntrude would come to see her on their wedding tour.

The wedding was very quiet. The bride, robed in a plain white dress, but with such a sweet face that all her former brilliant beauty had never equalled. The bells pealed gaily, rung by hearty, willing arms. The children scattered flowers at their feet, meeting once more "Lady Minna's" winsome smile. They went to the sea-side for a fortnight, leaving the Earl with some friends. Then they and the old man, who seemed to have received his life's lease in his daughter's happiness, left for Greece.

"The very source and fount of day,
Is dashed with wandering isles of night."

On a cold, fresh morn, Paul and his bride drove from Athens to the cottage of poor Irene. They were ushered by a maid-servant into a spacious, airy room, where a guitar, a drawing half-finished, and a heap of exquisite embroidery spoke sadly of the finished life-work of the dying girl. Rhoda came to lead them into Irene's chamber.

"She sleeps," she whispered.

On a couch by the window, which was wide open and revealed a lovely view, lay the sufferer. Her face was wasted to a shadow, her long lashes cast a shade on her thin cheeks. Alarmed, Ermyntrude looked at the old woman, who, interpreting the glance, said—

“She is but asleep.”

As if to verify her words, the dark eyes unclosed. A wondering gaze at the bright figure before her she gave, ere holding out her hands in welcome. With blinding tears the Englishwoman kissed her. With a pathetic smile Irene drew Paul’s hand to his wife’s, and, pressing each with her lips, murmured—

“May Heaven’s chiefest blessings rest on you both, here and hereafter.”

For some days she lingered on ; one afternoon she seemed much better ; how lovely she looked, the rest in her eyes, the shining light over the transparent features, the whole ethereal aspect of her delicate face. She gave Ermyntrude her silver ornaments, bespeaking her sympathy for her nurse. About the same time the next day they were sum-

moned to her, she was dying. Ermyntrude took her hand.

“Is it well, Irene?”

“All is well,” was the weak answer, “all peace.”

Paul bid her farewell, and with a sorrowing look of pity at her nurse, and a loving glance at Minna, she murmured, while a radiant light beamed from her dark eyes, “Peace, rest,” and then the eyelids drooped, quivered and all was still.

Ermyntrude stayed with Rhoda that night. The next day Paul came to fetch her about the sunset hour : she led him into the death chamber ; how calm the white face looked, the heavy fringed lids drawn over the pathetic eyes that never more would look their wistful gaze ; a smile of peace and joy rested on the lips. Her auburn hair was banded on the snow-white brow by Ermyntrude’s tender hands. Rhoda had placed a rich red rose in the fragile hands, that were clasped on the still breast, in memory of the old days when the pride and joy of the house, Irene would pluck the vividly tinted roses to deck

her white dress. Paul stood silently by the couch, his wife drew aside the blind, and the rich hues of the setting sun poured in upon the still form; as he looked across at the crimson light on the horizon, and noticed the evening star rising in the deep blue sky, this line from the poet "In memoriam," flashed into his mind—

"A hundred spirits whisper peace."

At last Ermyntrude dropped the blind, and shut out the fading light; taking up a long lock of hair, she said—

"I cut this off for you, Paul, dearest."

He clasped her in his arms, and exclaimed with dim eyes—

"My sweet wife, how thankful we ought to be for our own happiness." Then turning again to the dead girl, he smoothed her hair with a tender, regretful touch, murmuring, "poor child! poor Irene."

Minna gazed on the pure sweet face, and then closing her eyes, tried to think of her as she was now, an angel, a redeemed soul, clad in dazzling white, a crown of pure gold upon her head, a harp in her hand, and the same radiant look upon her spiritualized face that

had beamed from her eyes when dying. But the vision faded, only the poor human body lay before her gaze ; sinking by the couch she hid her face in the snowy drapings, and mutely returned thanks to the Dispenser of all joys and griefs, for the Greek girl's rest, and her own happy life.

A delicate cross of pure white marble was erected by the young husband and wife over the grave, and a fair white lily and scarlet rose grow by its side ; the lily stands erect, its golden petals pointing upwards to the blue Athenian sky ; the rose leans lovingly against the cross, swinging its scented blossoms in the fragrant air, and strewing the turf with its red petals ; the one was planted by Ermyntrode, the other by poor old Rhoda. The birds twitter near the cross, the golden light gilds it. The children gather the flowerets that grow near it. Near by is a humble grey stone cross, beneath which Rhoda sleeps ; she died four months after her young mistress ; it was raised to her memory by her own friends. Returning to England, Paul, his wife, and the old Earl took up their quarters in London, to spend some time there.





CHAPTER III.

“Devotion’s links comprise a sacred chain,
Of holy brightness, and unmeasured length,
The world with selfish rust, and reckless strain,
May mar its beauty, but not touch its strength.”

QUENE morning Ermyntrude was summoned to the reception-room to see a visitor; on her entrance, a tall woman, very plainly dressed, arose and said somewhat hurriedly—

“I am Lady Eveleigh, you are Lady Ermyntrude Devereux; you do not recognise me?”

One moment of startled pain, and recollection of that long past, unhappy time, and Ermyntrude answered—

“Perfectly, will you not be seated?”

“No, thank you. You are doubtless sur-

prised at my visit ; but my husband, who is dying, sent me to implore your forgiveness for his deception towards you ; you look surprised, but for some years have we lived together ; remorse for his conduct seized him a few months after that miserable time ; he sought me, and we were reconciled, still he was hard to me, repelled my love till lately, and now he is dying ! He has since confessed he did not really believe me dead."

Thus she hastily spoke, led to reveal something of her trials by the overflowing sympathy in her companion's eyes.

" I freely forgive him."

Expressing her thanks, Vera was going towards the door, when she paused, looked tristfully at Ermyntrede, and said—

" You are happy ?"

" Yes, in truth !"

Lady Eveleigh's eyes fell, a tear glistened on her black lashes.

" Indeed, Cecil was very truly sorry for your grief ; he saw your marriage in the paper, and rejoiced. It will ease his last hours to hear you pardon him and are happy."

With her old impulsiveness, Ermyntrude seized her hand, kissed her cheek, and cried—

“Vera, Vera, you are indeed a noble, devoted wife.”

A change passed over the poor stern features; bursting into tears she whispered—

“Nay, I left him once in anger. Oh, good, generous Ermyntrude, believe me, I have grieved for your grief, sorrowed for your sorrow. I grieved to destroy your early dream, but what could I do?”

“Dear Lady Eveleigh, you were my saviour.”

“My poor Cecil would like to see you again.”

“That must be as my husband wishes.”

Just then Paul came in; he looked astonished at the scene before him, but after hearing his wife's explanation, and seeing Vera's wistful look, he promised to bring Ermyntrude to see Cecil. So, late the following afternoon they were ushered into the sick room; she found it difficult to recognise in the wan face on the pillows the one she

had last seen in perfect strength ; and where was now the winning smile, and the lustrous sweetness of the violet orbs ? Lord Eveleigh looked many years older than he was ; his poor wife stood by him with her pale face, tending him with loving, anxious solicitude, as if he had been the best of husbands, instead of having spurned her yearning love for nearly all their eleven years of married life. Yet not entirely in vain had that affection been ; witness the turning of his dim eyes to her ; listen to the tender tone of his “ Vera.” Yes, at last, now it was too late, had he learnt to appreciate his devoted wife’s affection ; hope had begun to fill her breast, only to be cut short by a grave. Cecil gazed wonderingly at the tender, sweetly grave face of the woman who looked pityingly at him ; for his vision was of a merry-faced girl ; what had wrought the wondrous change ? He had heard now and again of her stern-eyed grief, but now he saw such a sweet gracious face. He turned his gaze on Paul ; this was her husband, this

grave-eyed, stately man ; this was he who had restored her to love and life. When he spoke, it was to him.

“ Mr. Devereux, give me your pardon, and your wife’s,” his eyes sunk before their look, but they replied in comforting words. In answer to her husband’s whispered words, Ermyntrude moved forward and held out her hand.

“ May you soon be restored to health, Lord Eveleigh, and a long life of happiness with your noble wife.”

He shook his head sadly, and turning to Vera, he said—

“ Nay, Lady Ermyntrude, my course is almost run. Poor Vera !”

At these words, Vera’s long pent-up grief burst forth ; flinging herself on her knees by the bed, she sobbed passionately, while her husband’s hand wandered with a kind of listless tenderness over her black hair.

“ We will care for your wife,” said Paul, gently. Cecil gave him a glance of smiling half-tearful gratitude, that restored some of his former beauty to his wasted face. Soon

Paul and Minna left. As they walked home, the former remarked—

“What a sad scene was that; to see the poor wife’s undying love and passionate grief.”

“And poor Cecil Eveleigh,” replied his wife with quivering voice, “what a waste of love and life has he made; how he must feel it now it is too late, and he sees what a treasure he has cast away in Vera’s affection.”

A few days after, the poor weak spirit went home, repentant and hopeful, softened and purified by a wife’s tears. For Vera clung to him to the last, cheering his spirit, bathing his brow, and praying him into the the Life Everlasting, as she humbly hoped, content that his last look was hers, his last kiss on her brow, his last words, “Vera! Vera!”

So there was a grand funeral, and Lord Eveleigh’s friends brought into contact for almost the first time with Vera, touched by her pathetic look, gave her a tardy welcome into the family. But she remained but a little time with them, and Ermytrude per-

and dark, with a short face, scarcely oval, and too delicate in contour for a perfect round; olive complexion, lustrous black eyes, exquisitely shaped, and a quantity of wavy hair. Her attire, though simple, yet bore evidences of taste and wealth.

"Well, Helen," remarked the elder girl, still industriously swinging her hat to and fro, "I should not have thought a girl of your rank and wealth would have had many 'troubles,' as you call them."

"Yes, May," responded the other, in a sweet, plaintive voice, "and very tangible ones, though you may laugh, and think me fantastic. The very rank and riches bring their own penalties."

May smiled a little, as she replied—

"I have some very real ones, but, cheerfully borne, they turn into blessings."

"Lois worries me a good deal," resumed Helen, "she is so wild, and such a romp."

May laughed.

"She is very young, Nellie dear."

"She is sixteen; but two years younger than myself."

"So much ! She is so childlike."

"Childish !" said Helen, impatiently.

Before going further, it may be as well to give a brief outline of the girls' antecedents.

May Thornleigh was the daughter of the village surgeon ; for four years she had had charge of numerous brothers and sisters, her mother having died. Helen was the eldest daughter of a rich baronet, who owned a beautiful house near the village. In spite of the difference in their stations, the young girls were great friends. When Helen's mother died, leaving her two young daughters, aged respectively eleven and nine years, Mrs. Thornleigh had comforted and tended them, and they cherished a grateful remembrance of the kind lady who so often took them into her own bright family circle from their desolate home ; but when, a few years later, she herself died, May's chief solace was the sympathy of Helen Mervyn and her young sister. May, indeed, had her trials, as head of a house of nine, but a loving heart, sensible head, strong hand, and willing spirit bore her on. Helen had no such trials ; even

cheery May, in the presence of some special worry, would sigh a little as she thought of her friend's luxurious lot; but the former would gladly have changed places with May, in spite of the latter's burden and house-keeping anxieties; a great desire for a more active life stirred in her heart—a sphere wherein she could be “of use.” She shrank from always spending her time in lazy luxury. Oh, that she were a man, to carve out her own life, to win renown as a soldier, a sailor; to win fame in some way. May Thornleigh had always been her ideal. She longed for her active, busy existence; yet, with all her aspirations, Helen was rather indolent, often neglecting obvious duties.

On the morning in question, soon after their last remarks, the friends reached a gate whereon was seated a laughing-eyed girl, Lois Mervyn. She was like Helen, save that her face was rosier, her eyes of the darkest blue, and her hair less black; she had not such a delicately beautiful face as her sister, but possessed more force and determination of expression. She greeted

the girls with a mischievous smile, and Helen asked where she had been all the morning. "Oh, rambling about with Horace Gresham" (with a little defiant look). Her sister made a little gesture of despair. May advanced to Lois, and, coaxingly patting her plump hands, said—

"Promise me, dearie, to do as Helen wishes; strive to please her. She is anxious for your welfare."

Lois nodded smilingly, and, springing down, said—

"I like to tease poor old Nell."

At the gate of May's home they parted; the sisters passing towards their own home, and May going slowly up the narrow path between the rows of standard roses, into the hall, where she was received by the two little children with loving hugs.

Late that afternoon Helen and Lois returned from paying a series of calls. As they entered the village, Mrs. Gresham, a friend of theirs, passed them with another lady and her son, a handsome young man of

twenty-one. As the carriage drove past, Lois remarked—

“Horace looks very astonished to see me so steady in all my grandeur, card-case and all.”

“Lois, Lois! you should not call him ‘Horace.’”

“Why not? I’ve known him all my life. Why don’t you call Algernon ‘Mr. Thornleigh,’ then?” whereat Helen only blushed slightly.

When they reached the Thornleigh’s house, Lois proposed to go in and see May. Her sister, not at all unwillingly, agreed. As they went up the path, the former’s quick eyes descried some one seated behind the muslin curtains of the dining-room. Advancing on tip-toe across the lawn, she beckoned Helen to follow, but, to her surprise, and Helen’s dismay, it was Algernon, who looked up with a quiet smile. She laughed—

“I thought it was May. Look, Helen, here is Algernon.”

Thus admonished, the latter advanced, the colour in her cheeks rivalling the blush-roses

around the window. They entered the house, May running to meet them, begging them to stay to tea. Helen demurred, saying her father would be alone; but, her sister volunteering to return alone, she willingly followed May upstairs. Lois dressed for dinner, and descended to the drawing-room to practise the songs she must sing to her father in the evening; presently Sir Edward came in, his stern, dark face softening as he bent to receive his daughter's kiss.

“Where is Helen, my pet?”

“Nellie remained at the Thornleighs.”

“Ah, then, I suppose I must endeavour to put up with your company and singing to-night” (his smile belying his words).

Meanwhile, Helen spent a very pleasant evening with her genial friends. As the soft June night drew on, she started for home, escorted by Algernon, who was a pleasant-faced young man, with a strong resemblance to his eldest sister, whose senior he was by two years. The village lay bathed in silvery light. Helen felt strangely shy, with a vivid consciousness of the tall strong figure by her

side, though her eyes were bent on the white road, with its magic tracery of branches reflected from the overhanging trees by the glorious moon. All too soon the avenue gate was reached, at least so one of the almost silent pair thought. As they passed a thicket the nightingales were heard in full song; Algernon paused a moment to listen to the rippling melody; Helen tarried also. As they moved on, he said—

“How such a lovely moonlight night saddens one.”

“Yes, they always make me melancholy. I feel then how I fritter my life away; but you, Algernon, are a man, and can carve your life to what shape you may like,” and she sighed deeply.

He looked searchingly at her downcast face.

“I understand you, Helen; but remember, dear friend, though you cannot go forth to struggle with the world, like a man, there are yet duties which you can, and ought to perform at home.”

Here they wished each other good-night, Algernon holding her hand with a look on his

face that strangely fluttered, and pleased her. When she reached the drawing-room Sir Edward looked up from the book he was perusing.

"Well, Nellie," said he, "you have made a long visit, but it seems to have agreed with you. How bright you look. Who brought you home?"

"Algernon" (as she half-nervously played with the tassels of an antimacassar).

"Algernon!" repeated her father reflectively. "Has he passed his examinations?"

"Yes, all, father." Then she added, hesitatingly, "I may ask the Thornleighs to my ball?"

"Certainly, child; why do you ask? They are a very worthy family."

Helen's good-night kiss was very grateful. Long after Lois was asleep, her sister lay awake in the adjoining room, musing in the dark; a smile on her face. Ah, little Lois, with your rosy, slumbering, child-face, your Nellie has left you far behind life's experience.



The following afternoon, Helen was seated at the dining-room window, listlessly gazing over the sunny garden. Seeing May coming up the drive, she hastened to meet her.

"Dear Maylie, I want to talk to you; you will do me good. I've driven Lois away by my ill-temper."

"Yes; I met the dear child. She told me to come and see you. She feared you were ill; for you were in such low spirits."

"I wish I were half as good and content as she," sighed Helen.

"Yes," was the warm reply. "With all her little vagaries, Lois is a thoroughly good girl."

Helen's head dropped against her friend's shoulder—

"Tell me what I can do. When I see you so cheerful and busy I feel so very useless."

The other's blue eyes looked grave, as she replied—

"You are in a very different station to me; your duties are different, also."

"Tell me them."

"Nay, dear friendie. If you but look

around you, you will soon perceive them. Come, be gay and hopeful, you are very young. As your life widens your duties will increase. And now you have everything to make you happy—except the mother-love we both have lost,” her tone sinking. “Wealth, position, a dear sister, a tender father, true friends, and yes, dear Helen, beauty; do not blush so. Wealth, rank, beauty! Are not these talents to be employed, with thankful hearts, to the Giver of all good things? Now I must go; the children are alone. Good-by.”

With an affectionate embrace they parted. May to her usual homely duties, Helen to an assiduous practice of the sonata to be played to her father after dinner, which was the first duty that presented itself; then to industrious stitching of some clothes, begun long since, for the poor.

Two days after, came Sunday; always a peaceful time in Elmsford village. Regularly as the bells clanged out, Dr. Thornleigh, who had more leisure that day, started for church, his laddies—Willie, a fair-haired boy of thir-

teen, and dark-eyed Edgar, who was like his beloved mother—on either side; the second son, Henry, and pretty Louisa followed. Then came Algernon, with the beauty of the family, little Kitty, clinging to his hand. Lastly came May, with the two little ones. This was their general procession; but to-day Kitty finds her dear Algernon very quiet, and now and again peers up wonderingly into his frank, fair face, on which an unusual amount of grave thought broods.

They had just seated themselves in the little, old church, that possessed but few objects of interest, the chief being the tablets of the Mervyn family, and a beautiful stained-glass window, in the chancel, in memory of Sir Edward's wife. Near the Thornleigh's two pews is a plain, marble tablet, in memory of "Marion, wife of Henry Thornleigh."

May's eyes often wistfully seek the inscription, "Her end was peace."

Aye, sweet peace all her life had gentle Marion Thornleigh's great attribute been—a quiet, humble, yet bright, glad spirit.

When the family from the Hall entered,

Lois and her father first, Helen following slowly, she did not look towards their pews, yet she knew Algernon was there, his strong, black-sleeved arm resting on the door.

Algernon sighs. In the simple blue-and-white costumes the sisters wear, he sees indications of wealth, that show him, with unrelenting sternness, how far above him, in worldly things, Helen Mervyn stands.

Is his love hopeless? for he does love her. As he looks at Sir Edward's haughty face, he fears it is. Well, he knows how proud he is, and that only his regard for his father's sterling merits, and gratitude to his dead mother, for her kindness to his motherless girls, have bridged over the gulf between his station and the village doctor's. Will that bridge fail him, if he tread thereon, striving to reach the land of his dreams? He fears to try; if it be hopeless he will bear the burden alone—he will not seek Helen's love.

After the service was over, the two families met in the churchyard, the Baronet conversing affably with May and her father; Alger-

non fell behind with Helen, while Lois joined the younger ones.

Her face flushed a little, her voice was low. He noticed this. What did it portend? Not very long ago these now shy eyes had met his frankly. The trembling tones had been firm and merry. Why this new timidity? Could she be afraid of her old playmate? He half-smiled at the thought. Then his own face grew red, his own words ceased, as the idea that came to him—Did she care for him as he did for her?

They parted at the gate, Sir Edward and his daughters turning up the pleasant chestnut walk, that led to a distant lodge of his park.

Long years afterwards did Algernon recall that day, when the summer's sun, falling over all, and flickering through the leaves, he tarried by the churchyard wicket to watch Helen Mervyn's lithe form, in the white-and-blue robe, flit along the shady walk. And again the moments, at once so sweet and bitter, return to him, when he first learnt to guess dimly his love was not unreturned.

Again he sighed, as he moved on, and May, who had waited for him, silently, with a gesture of sympathy, passed her arm through his.

The ball took place on Helen's birthday. Robed in pale, lemon-coloured silk, with jewels in her dark hair, she made a radiant queen of the evening; but a check came to her happiness as the hours passed on.

Her father approached, saying, "Well, Nellie, your party seems very successful. Who did you dance with first?"

"With Algernon."

"With Algernon Thornleigh? You should have opened the ball with Sir Lionel Branscombe, or some other titled person. Old friends are all very well, but the Thornleighs are not our equals; and there are social duties to be performed, Helen!"

Her heart sank. Never before had her father spoken to her with such an angry voice.

After the other guests were gone, Lois proposed an impromptu dance, ere the Thornleighs left.

Sir Edward, coming in, smiled at the

dancers, then frowned slightly, as his glance fell on Helen and Algernon, who sat apart, conversing in a low voice. Approaching them he said—

“ Well, Nellie, are you too tired to join these indefatigable people ? ”

“ I am tired,” she faltered.

Helen and Lois accompanied their friends to the hall door, to bid them good-by; dawn was near, dew hung on shaded tree and flowers; waving farewell, Lois turned towards her sister, whose eyes were full of tears—

“ I am afraid you are fatigued, Nellie dear.”

Helen kissed her silently, and hastened upstairs; wearily she submitted to be disrobed; left alone, she indulged in a burst of tears. One day, late in the autumn, she spent with May; Algernon, then at home once more, took her home, as the dusk drew on; her face was very hot and flushed when she reached home; running upstairs, she threw herself on a sofa, bursting into a passion of tears, sweet and bitter; for he had confessed his love, and she feared her

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father's pride—oh that she were but poor, and of humble rank! For long days to come did she remember her father's fierce wrath on hearing Algernon's proposal; he forbade him his house, and finally gave Helen her choice: would she keep her lover, and lose her father for ever; or would she renounce him, and cleave to her father?

Poor girl! None ever fully knew what it cost her to decide; but at last her resolve was taken—she could not forsake her father. Writing a note to Algernon, she requested him to meet her, to hear her decision. Late that stormy afternoon, he stood waiting for her in a distant part of the park; soon he saw her cloaked and furred figure coming slowly down the leafless avenue. He remained motionless: would she be true to him?

Helen raised a pale face to his anxious gaze; he silently pressed her cold hands.

“Which is it to be, Helen?”

She drew her fingers from his grasp, and leaning on the fence, burst into tears!

“I do not know, Algernon, I love you, but my father, I cannot leave him!”

"Dear Helen, act as you think best. Your father has a parent's right ; but it is wrong to interfere with true affection. If we part now, Helen, it must be for ever ; I go abroad soon, will you go with me, or remain here ?"

"Algernon, I must remain" (she covered her face).

A long pause followed ; there came no angry upbraiding, no noisy grief, only a death-like silence ; alarmed, she looked up ; his face was very pale, and there was a hurt far-off look in his eyes it cut her to the heart to see.

"Algernon," sobbed she. He aroused himself, and with a faint piteous smile, he touched her arm.

"Poor little Helen, do not fear for me. Be happy."

"Happy ! I shall never be that !"

But he seized her trembling hands.

"Listen, Helen ! If you had chosen me, I should never have given you up ; as it is, I renounce all claim upon you, though you have promised to be my wife. But all is over !"

He ceased. Timidly she implored his pardon.

"I have nothing to forgive, Helen; you must rather pardon my selfishness in bringing the trouble upon you. Oh, my darling, it is hard for both of us, but God help us! Good-by, dear Helen, for ever!"

He turned, and strode rapidly down the park road; the rising wind whistled damp withered leaves around his path. Helen stood as in a dream till his tall form was out of sight; then uttering a sobbing cry of "Algernon!" she sunk half-senseless on the ground; soon the rain fell heavily and sullenly on her; rising, she crept home; there, she wearily laid on the couch by her bedroom fire, listening dreadingly to the rain dashing against the window. Late in the evening Lois entered, looking half shyly at her; her sister's love and sorrow had fallen like a thunder-bolt on her childish heart.

"Papa is waiting for your decision, Nellie."

Wearily rising, Helen bathed her face, smoothed her hair, and, slipping her hand in Lois', went down to the library. Here her

sister left her, with a little pressure of the hand.

Her father was seated before the fire, his face pale and stern ; but as she drew near, touched by her worn face, he held out his hand.

“ Well, Helen.”

“ Father, I have chosen you !”

A loving smile broke over his face. “ My own brave girl !” But she fell on her knees, by the chair, sobbing brokenly.

“ Don’t call me brave, father. I feel so weak and treacherous, so base ; I promised to be his wife.”

Sir Edward moved impatiently.

“ You may go and fulfil your promise.”

“ Don’t be angry, dear father ; let me stay with you.”

He kissed her brow. “ Dear child, I grieve to wound you, but you will be happy yet, dear one. My blessing rest on you.” And even in her aching heart she felt the comfort of that benediction.

It was late in the winter before her father permitted Helen to call on May Thornleigh.

In anxious doubt as to her reception, she knocked at the familiar door. On being ushered into the dining-room, she found May alone, engaged in making a frock for little Maud. On seeing Helen she coloured, and, rising, tendered her hand, distantly ; but the other's black lashes were wet, as she cried—

“ Oh, May, don't look at me thus.”

Half hesitatingly, May kissed her, and drew her to the fire, then, resuming her work, looked as though she knew not what to say.

“ May, dear, I have missed you very much ; I am so miserable.”

“ Yes, we have both suffered, I suppose. I am so sad when I think of poor Algernon.”

“ And I, too.”

“ Why did you encourage him ? ”

Helen stammered—

“ I did not know—I did not think—I loved him so—it was such a delightful dream.”

Tears came here, and May's own fell slowly on the bright little robe.

Helen knelt beside her.

“ May, can we be friends still ? ”

“ That is as you like.”

But Helen's piteous “ May ” thawed her iciness, and the two girls mingled their tears, hopes, and fears together.

It was growing dusk, as Helen hastened home, along the freezing lane. Her heart had received a warm ray of comfort. She was reconciled to May. That night, for the first time for many weeks, she sang to her father in the cosily-lighted room, while Lois nestled at his feet, plying her knitting needles.

During the next year she saw but little of May. In the spring they went to France, spending the summer in Switzerland. There amongst those grand mountains, some so smiling and verdant, others so bare and rugged, others, again, so snowy and pure, great thoughts rose in her soul. After all, how little our own trials and griefs seem, compared with the whole joys and sorrows of all the struggling human race ; when, in the moonlight nights, thoughts of eternity pierce our souls, and we quiver for our own shortcomings, how trivial seem the injustices and offences of others to ourselves.

One evening she stood looking at the glorious Matterhorn, rising, like a rocky pyramid, into the sky, the very snow slipping from its sides; the setting sun softening its sombre beauty with golden, red, pink, and blue tints. Below it lay the lovely valley, with its foaming rivers and flower-gemmed meads.

Her heart was full of yearning feelings, scarce clad in thought. How small a thing she appeared, amidst all the wonders of Nature. Who was she, to rebel at God's will, who could raise those lofty mountains? Yet He, who created them, made the delicate wild flowers at her feet; cared for the birds, who fly in His free air. Surely, then, He cared for her, Helen Mervyn, and could hear her cry, and would not lay on her a burden beyond her strength.

Lois here joined her.

"What are you thinking of, Helen?"

"Of God's infinite care. See, Lois. Though He made that awful mount, yet He painted that frail, lovely gentian, in your grasp. Surely, then He cares for His people. 'Are

ye not more than many sparrows ?' Yet not one falls to the ground without Him."

Lois answered, half shyly—

"Thank Him you have learnt His love."

The young sisters then wandered, hand in hand, down the dewy meads, talking reverently of things far above all human joys and sorrows.





CHAPTER II.

TWO years have passed since the events recorded in the last chapter. At the drawing-room window of Mervyn House is seated Helen. The fragrant rose-scented air steals into the room. She looks very lovely; her beauty is more striking than it used to be. There is a decision in her expression formerly wanting. Not at all unhappy does she look, as, with an amused smile, she watches Lois flit from one flower-bed to another with a light watering-can.

Very pretty has the latter become. Her winning ways make her a general favourite. She laughs and talks gaily with Horace Gresham, who closely follows her footsteps. Presently she pauses beside a white rose tree

in full bloom. He is evidently begging a flower, for her face is full of demure mischief as she lifts first one rose, then another, finally presenting him with a half-withered one. But he takes her hand, and says something earnestly. Her face suddenly, but softly, becomes suffused with a rosy flush. Hastily withdrawing her hand she plucks a lovely flower, and gives it him. Moving quickly away, she approaches the window where Helen sits. But the amused smile has faded from the latter's face. She looks very grave and somewhat startled. Seeing her expression, Lois pauses, shyly confused, beginning to gather some yellow jessamine. Horace approaches to wish "Good night." Lois accompanied him to the gate. When she returns she enters by the hall door, and runs upstairs.

Helen sits musingly. A revelation has come to her. Horace and her sister are no longer the children she, aged by her sad experience, believed them. Will her little Lois have to undergo like pain? for well she knows her father would not consider the young soldier, Horace Gresham, though he

came of good family, an equal match for his pretty daughter.

That night, after anxious consideration, Helen entered her sister's room. Lois sat before her dressing-table, her long black hair flowing over her white dress, a smile on her rosy face.

Silently Helen advanced to her, with a grave look. Lois seized a brush, commencing to dress her hair. Finding her sister did not speak, she threw down the brush, tossing back her wavy locks, asking defiantly—

“ Well, Nellie ? ”

Helen played nervously with a gold necklace, as she said—

“ I fear Horace has said something to you, Lois, dear.”

Lois only looked a little petulant.

“ Forgive my seeming intrusion, darling,” went on Helen, “ but I am your elder sister ; I would act a mother's part by you, as far as I am able.”

With a sudden revulsion of feeling, Lois sprang up, and kneeling by her sister's side, cried—

“ I will tell you all Horace said. ‘ Lois,

I love you as my own life ; give me a rose, if I dare hope,' and then I read as by a flash of light my own feelings ; I gave him a white rose-bud. Helen, I am so happy ! He will see papa, to-morrow. Helen, why do you look so sad ? ”

“ Because, my darling Lois, I fear me, papa will refuse his consent.”

For a moment Lois looked as though she did not comprehend her sister's words, then she smiled confidently.

“ Fear not, Nellie, papa loves me too well. And why should he refuse ? Horace is of a good county family.”

“ Remember my case.”

“ Yes, poor pet, but there is a—” she stopped, colouring, for the words she had being going to say, were, “ there is a difference between the Greshams and the Thornleighs.”

Helen seeing it would be useless to argue, bade her good-night ; and retired to her own room, where long into the night she prayed with tears, that “ Little Lois ” might be spared the fate that had overtaken herself.

About the middle of the next morning, Sir Edward, looking somewhat perplexed, came into the morning-room.

"Lois, come with me to my study."

Trembling in spite of herself, she obeyed. Sir Edward drew her to his side, saying gently—

"Can it be true that my Lois is in love?"

"Yes, dear papa."

"I can scarcely comprehend it (with a faint smile), but my darling should have been warned by her sister's case, that I would never give my peerless girl to one beneath her."

Lois' eyes flashed.

"The Greshams are equal to us."

"Nay, my dear; neither in wealth or station."

"Horace is a true gentleman."

"Freely granted, my love, and in his case there is no presumption, as in young Thornleigh's, but still I look higher for my little pet."

"Algernon Thornleigh is quite as much a gentleman as Horace."

"We will waive that point. It deeply

grieves me, Lois, to have both my daughters fail my hopes."

"But wealth and rank are not everything."

"Certainly not, but I did not find that they made your dear mother distasteful in my eyes."

"Ah, but father, you loved her!"

"You are young, Lois, both you and Gresham; put aside your fancy, it is hopeless. My sweet one, I hardly know how to refuse you anything."

She smiled into his grave face.

"No, papa, you don't, and when it would make me so very, very glad, you won't."

But he put aside the clinging arm.

"I have said 'no!'"

Lois drew back, her eyes full of tears; she had never before been repulsed by her father, she had scarcely thought him serious before; she now in trembling tones murmured—

"Can you be so cruel, father?"

"Another day you will thank me."

She fell on her knees, clinging to his arm.

"Dear father, for the love you bore my dead mother, do not break my heart, father,"

and with those blue eyes so like his beloved wife's, gazing into his, he wavered, but for a moment.

"No, Lois, I shall write to Horace."

"Let me." She drew a desk towards her, and wrote—

"DEAR HORACE,—Papa refuses his consent. My heart feels breaking, but perhaps brighter days will come. I can never marry you without my father's consent, but I will never marry another, and shall always love you.

"LOIS."

Her father felt inclined to tear this note up at first; but something in the brave spirit the hastily penned lines breathed, touched him.

"You may send it; but it is a vain hope you give him."

"Father, of course, I obey you, but hear me. I will always be true to Horace Gresham." She quitted the room.

She would have pitied her father, could she have seen the tear that fell on his papers after she had gone; it grieved him to the heart to wound his favourite child; but he

really considered he was acting for her benefit; he also recognised in her a stronger, braver spirit than poor Helen possessed, and felt it would be war between his stubborn will and her firm resolve.

Sad were the days that followed. Helen felt the grief nearly as keenly as Lois, who almost despaired at first, but after a time she resolved to be cheerful; her sweetness towards her father touched him deeply. Helen (with her sister's consent) carried this fresh trouble to May; the embargo on their intercourse having been removed.

"Oh, May, how happy you are, to be free from all love-trials." May answered not, but looked sad and troubled for a moment.

The following autumn and winter were but dull; Lois tried to be happy, not to grieve others, but her sweet face looked very pale, her blue eyes sad. The season they spent in London, gaiety after gaiety being forced upon them by their father. The bustle and new life roused Lois into some of her former spirits. Helen grew very gay and beautiful, receiving much attention; she

had crushed down her love, till she believed it dead. Amongst other admirers, was Sir Lionel Branscombe, a very proud, but fascinating man of seven-and-twenty. He had long admired Helen, and now that he saw her the brilliant *belle* of the season, he sought to win her for his wife. One evening, robed in cream-colour silk, with crimson roses in her hair, she went to a ball; ere the close he had proposed; the scene—a large conservatory filled with plants, and flowers, almost tropical in their hues, with a vista of richly-attired ladies, and handsome men—contrasted strangely with the quiet country lane in the growing dusk of an autumn eve, the remembrance of which chilled her heart, as she listened to Sir Lionel. She promised her answer in a day or two. The next few days were a time of severe battling between the old love, that sought to rise up, and what she thought the new; finally, her father's earnest desire and Sir Lionel's petitions won the day.

Lois looked very grave, as she wished her sister joy; and Helen? The white face that looked at her from her mirror, was a strangely

sad one for the owner of joyful thoughts. Now the die was cast, how gladly would she have acted otherwise! Lois, also, received two offers, but refused both; unscathed, she passed through all ordeals faithful and true. One day she met Horace once more, and on his renewing his petition, Sir Edward granted it; for Lois' faded spirits and pale cheeks filled him with remorse, and he was elated by his elder daughter's engagement. Lois' brave, true, independent, yet dutiful spirit, pleased him more than the tear-bought, agony-crowned sacrifice of poor Helen.

The latter, as she witnessed her sister's joy, felt thankful that her betrothal had paved the way for that happiness.

Sir Edward often wondered how it was that all the *éclat* of Helen's proposed match should afford him less satisfaction than Lois' more lowly one.

They returned to Elmsford. May's faithful heart ached as she wrote to tell her brother of Helen's defalcation. A coldness sprung up between the friends, and Helen, unable to bear it, and to see Lois' happy

preparations for her wedding, left home to visit some relatives. Away from Sir Lionel's influence, she saw how weak she had been. Returning home, she waited for some time at a road-side station. As she gazed blankly out of the window, the text, "Perfect love casteth out fear," came into her mind. Ah, then, indeed, her affection for Lionel Branscombe was far from perfect, for she feared his strong will, hasty temper, and stern pride, yea, feared him, as she had not Algernon. Even in the terrible hour when she took away her promised troth, she recalled his tenderness, fortitude, and forgiving heart, and she shuddered to think what Sir Lionel would do if she broke her word with him; but that could never be. There was no turning back. Now, like lightning, fell the scales from her eyes. The love she had believed dead lived yet, and was growing strong again, while her love for Sir Lionel was but the unreal dream of a fascinated imagination.

Sick at heart, she continued her journey, and entered the luxurious carriage, with its superb horses, that met her at the station.

As she passed Dr. Thornleigh's house, Willie, now a tall stripling, passed her, raising his hat, with polite respect. But she knew how different his boyish face would have been if it had been Lois who saluted him.

This trifling incident increased her depression. Bidding the coachman leave her at the gate, she wandered up the avenue. Leaning on the wicket leading on to the lawn, was her sister, clad in white muslin, with cherry-coloured ribbons, fluttering in the evening breeze, the peace of her bright spirit shining in her eyes.

Helen's heart sank yet lower at sight of her and at the contrast between her own fate and hers. Yet she had brought it on herself. Could she have kept firm and true, like her, she would have been happier, even if destined to have her hopes unfulfilled.

Lois flung the gate open, and clung to her affectionately—

"My own Nellie! I'm so glad you've come back; we have such a little time to be together."

Helen embraced her tenderly, forcing back her tears. Lois, seeing her weary looks, led her indoors. Left alone in her own chamber, she went to the window, gazing absently over the summer landscape, laying bathed in yellow evening light. Her maid came to dress her, and, when robed in a blue silk, she joined her sister on the lawn, she looked better, though still worn and fagged. Scarcely had she uttered a few words to Lois, before Horace appeared at the end of the lawn. With a cry of welcome Lois hastened to meet him.

Helen sighed. Not thus could she greet Lionel, who, at that moment, came forward with her father. The latter greeted her affectionately, then turned to his younger child, with a look of gratified pride, and a tender kiss, as if she were the newly-returned.

Helen's eyes filled, but, at that moment, her lover seized her hand, and his voice said gently—

“My dearest Nellie, I have missed you; you are looking pale and thin. Were you

anxious to get home?" with a mischievous smile.

But she shrank from the tender welcome.

The ninth of September had come, Lois' marriage day. The sun shone brilliantly over the new-mown fields. All nature looked as bright as the bonnie bride's face. Amongst her bridesmaids was Louisa Thornleigh, for they had always kept up their friendship. May was also there. The white dresses and bouquets of varied-hued roses suited Helen well. Rarely had she looked better; but her face was a little cold and hard, for she was suffering keenly, but resolved to conceal it.

At Lois' trustful, devout, hopeful "I will," unwonted tears bedewed her brilliant eyes.

May often looked, for pure enjoyment, down the aisle, to her own pew, where Kitty, Robert, and Maude, in gala attire, watched the ceremony with eager faces.

In her desk at home lay the noble, despairing answer of Algernon to her letter, telling him of Helen's engagement.

The sisters were alone together for the last time, perchance, for many years, for

Captain Gresham's regiment was ordered to India.

"What shall I do without you, Lois?"

"Be hopeful, Helen, and comfort my father; with him and Lionel you will not miss me; and you will be married soon."

Helen concealed her whitening face.

Here May's face, half tears, half smiles, peeped into the room—

"Horace is ready, dear."

The parting between the bride, her father, and sister was very bitter. At length the carriage drove off, their last glimpse of their darling being her bright smile, as she waved "Adieu."

The rest of the day the ball and various ceremonies was unbearable to Helen. When, the last to go, she had seen Sir Lionel ride off to his own house, she ran upstairs, and, fastening her door, ushered in the soft September dawn with a burst of passionate tears.

The end of October had come. The gorgeously-tinted leaves were beginning to fall; November mists loomed in the distance.



One morning Helen sat listless and pre-occupied before the window of the drawing-room. She had scarcely realised how they would miss Lois, till her bright presence had gone. They missed her rippling laugh, beaming face, and winsome ways. It was as though a broad gleam of sunshine, or a bright-hued bird had left them. But it was not of this Helen was thinking that bright Autumn morn, but of her unfortunate engagement, which weighed on her like leaden bonds.

Suddenly the door opened, and Sir Lionel came in.

She said, in a vexed tone—

“I thought you were gone with the other sportsmen.”

“I came back, for I knew you felt dull; you miss your sister so much.”

How could she, in the face of his kindly consideration, tell him she could not care for him?

“You do look sad, dear.”

But she put aside his caressing hand, saying, in a forced, frightened way—

“Lionel, I do not deserve your kindness, I fear I cannot marry you.”

She stopped, in tremulous expectancy, but he only said, in an amused tone—

“Why do you?”

“Because I should not make you a good wife.” Then, taking courage, “It needs such infinite forbearance between husband and wife.”

But still he would not be serious.

“There would be no need of my forbearance, I should always think you perfection.”

“But, Lionel,” said she falteringly, “you know—”

She paused.

“I think I know what you wish to say; but your father, as you are aware, has told me all. I love you devotedly; I cannot give you up. You are low-spirited and despondent this morning. I am very glad I came back to cheer you. Shall we go for a drive, or ride, or walk?”

“Neither, Lionel, I should be but poor company this morning; let me alone for a little time.”

He quitted her with a smile, and a “good-bye my conscientious little Nellie.”

When he reached the lawn, his smile faded;

a moody expression settled on his haughty face. He attached more importance than he had shown to her words ; he resolved to hold her to her troth-plight ; never could his pride suffer it to be said, " that he, Lionel Branscombe, had been ' jilted ' by Helen Mervyn."

Months rolled by, spring came ; her father and Lionel wished the wedding to take place. As dress after dress came home to be added to the *trousseau*, and present after present of costly lace or jewels were given her by her father, Helen's heart grew heavier, her face paler and thinner. Was there no escape ? Sir Lionel's feelings had gradually undergone a change ; Helen's words had sunk deeper than he had shown ; they had created a doubt of her ; he dreaded lest their wedded life should prove unhappy ; his was a nature that required absolute unwavering affection and unflinching faith in the one he loved. It pained him to see Helen's fear of him, how she shunned him, and to notice how gravely sad her face grew, and to see the efforts she made to conquer her feelings to spare his.

Somehow, he did not blame her ; his keen eye read her story ; he honoured her for her devotion to her father's will ; nevertheless, how gladly would he have hailed the breaking of the bond that had grown so uncongenial, if it could have been done in a way not to injure his tyrant pride.

It was the eve of her wedding-day. Helen sat listlessly arranging her jewel chest, when her maid brought her a fresh present from Sir Lionel—a magnificent set of pearls, sapphires and turquoises. For an instant she lost her trouble in admiring them ; then she replaced them in their casket, a tear falling on the white satin lining. Taking it in her hands, a sudden resolution blanching her face, she sought him ; he stood moodily gazing out on the lawn. She went towards him, silently tendering him the jewels.

“ What is it Helen ? ” (a surprised expression coming over his face).

“ Lionel, take them back, and with them my troth.”

“ What can you mean ? ” he cried fiercely, “ and to-morrow fixed for our marriage ! Do

you think I will suffer my name to be ridiculed by the world of rank and fashion ? ”

“ I will bear all,” she replied humbly, “ and it will be better than leading unhappy lives.”

“ Why should we be unhappy ? ” (sullenly).

“ Because, mutual love and trust are wanting.”

“ You should have thought of that before ; it is too late. Your false lips told me you loved me.”

“ I confess I have wronged you ; but I should do so still more if I married you when (her voice sinking) I love another.”

“ Come, Helen, this is useless, and unseemly, it is hard for us both ; but I trust happier days will come ; I refuse to release you from your engagement.”

That evening, after a vain appeal to her father, who said she “ ought to have had more sense to begin with,” Helen retired crushed and humiliated to her room ; there in the solitude, a terrible resolve came to her—she would leave her home. She knew that by doing so she would offend her father past forgiveness ; but there seemed

no other way of escape. Almost mechanically she put together the presents her father had given her as marriage gifts, then all Lionel's in a box, enclosing a letter, imploring his forgiveness. Then she drew from her dressing case a lock of her mother's hair and her portrait, and an old fashioned bracelet that belonged to her; also an antique locket, containing her father's portrait (a present from Lois long years ago). These were cherished *souvenirs* she could not leave behind. With one wild prayer for guidance, she stole downstairs; by the time she reached the hall, her throat was throbbing, her heart beating suffocatingly; could she leave her father for ever? Suddenly she laid down her package, returning upstairs to her father's door, there she knelt down and prayed, her tears falling; once more she descended, and stood before the hall door, another second, and there came a rush of night air; she stood outside the closed door, self-exiled. A large dog rushed upon her barking furiously; trembling from fear of discovery, she called it by name; linking her

fingers in its collar, she coaxed it back to its kennel, and tied it up; flinging her arms round its neck, she lavished her grief at forsaking her home on the dumb, but faithful creature. As she moved away, it made frantic efforts to get loose; finding its struggles vain, it uttered a prolonged, dismal howl, that rang far into the dark night, and sank as a presage of evil into the poor girl's perturbed heart.

To one of the undergrooms' astonishment, the watch dog was found re-chained, which he had set free the preceding night; how came it to submit to be tied up again, and who could have done it? Long and impatiently did Sir Edward wait for his daughter that morning; at last her maid came to say she could find her mistress nowhere. All search was in vain—it was but too plain that Helen was gone. With a white face, and a strange medley of passionate feeling, did Sir Lionel obey the hasty summons to Mervyn House. Sir Edward met him with bowed head and shamed face.

“Is she really gone?”

"I fear so ; she came to me yesterday, imploring my intercession with you ; I refused, never would I permit such conduct ; she is gone, henceforth she is no more my child !"

"Do not say that," cried Lionel (generous sorrow for the unfortunate girl overpowering his angry wounded pride) "she has suffered ; twice she implored my releasing her. I refused, because of my haughty spirit ; this blow serves me right."

The Baronet gazed sorrowfully at him.

"I could have loved you as a son."

"I thank you," was the quiet answer, "let me implore you to forgive your daughter."

"Never !" was the stern reply.

The guests and bridesmaids were prevented from coming.

The lady's-maid brought Lionel the box directed to him ; he opened, read the letter, and took it to Sir Edward ; the latter perused it, and threw it on one side.

"Do you not feel anxious as to where Helen is ?" asked Lionel.

"No, I have told you she is henceforth a stranger to me."

Finding entreaties vain, Sir Lionel ordered his horse, and rode away through the soft May morning, bitterly rueing his foolish pride, that had brought him into such dire ridicule (as he thought); dashing the spurs into his horse, he galloped many a weary mile, to work off his irritation and remorse. Remorse because he felt his wicked haughtiness had been the cause of Helen's flight. What misery had he brought about between the father and daughter! The stain of tears on the white satin lining of the jewel-casket haunted him with pathetic persistency. The stars were shining as he threw himself off his jaded steed at his own door. With all his worried, remorseful mood, he yet felt free, unburdened! and a sweet face, as pure as the stars in the pale sky, rose like a beacon on his half-unwilling spirit—the face of May Thornleigh. The latter heard the news of Helen's flight with mingled joy and sorrow; sorrow for her still loved friend's distress; joy because she and Lionel Branscombe could now never be united.

That evening, Sir Edward Mervyn sat with bowed head at his study table, in the

very room where in bygone days his two fair children had played; remorse for his hardness to Helen growing on him, and bitter anxiety, which as yet he refused to acknowledge, as to her fate. As dusk crept on, a fancy came to him that he saw his young wife, with her lovely face and soft brown hair, sitting, as she often used to, in the broad window seat, prattling brightly to her first born, the Helen who had fled from her home and father! "Helen!" it was her name.

The scene changed, the youthful face was white and thin; he seemed to hear the weak, faint words—

"Edward, you must be a mother as well as father to our dear girls when I am gone. Be very gentle with Helen, hers is a peculiar temperament, sensitive, yet proud. What may be in store for her I know not; be very tender with my little Nell. For bonnie Birdie I have no fear."

Again he heard his own promise; nearly eleven years had passed since then; how had he kept that promise? Ah, now it was of no use to speak of care, and "everything being given her she could want." Sympathy had

been lacking; full well, knew he, his love for Lois had been fuller, deeper, tenderer than for Helen. But was he to blame for that, when every look, every smile the former gave him, recalled the bonnie face of his young wife! Why did her presence haunt him so persistently this eve? Half impatiently he rose and threw open the casement; the night air swept over his heated brow; but the scent of the flowers recalled the evenings of her early married life, when side by side his bride and he had sat at the window, looking forth at the quaint Dutch garden, talking hopefully of the future; wearily he turned away, a pale face seemed to look at him, a plaintive voice rang in his ear—

“Be very tender with my little Nell!”

Quitting the room, he ordered lights to be carried into the morning-room. Here he strove to concentrate his attention on his paper, muttering—

“I will not forgive her.”

But those sad blue eyes seek his still, and still he hears the words—

“My little Nell!



CHAPTER III.

THE scene now changes to Lois' Indian home. In a pretty room, with chintz-covered chairs and sofas, and bouquets of rich flowers, is seated Lois Gresham, looking even prettier and more joyous than Lois Mervyn; she is working at some dainty piece of point lace, listening to Horace, who reads aloud from an amusing book. Suddenly Lois, whose thoughts have flown to Old England, interrupts him in a plaintive voice—

“What a long time it is since I heard from home. What can Helen be doing? she must be married, yet I have received no notice of it.”

Horace lays down his book, saying—

“Yes, I have been surprised of late, that we have not heard from your father or sister.

I did not speak of it, fearing to alarm you ; but something must be wrong."

Lois turns her blue eyes on him with a piteous look.

"What can be wrong ? My father ! Helen ! are they ill ?" and she hides her face in her hands, feeling that she would give very much for one glimpse at her old home.

"Don't cry, darling, we shall hear soon."

"Horace, dear, think of the many, many miles we are away."

"Do you regret it, darling ?"

"No, oh no, but my father and sister are dear to me !"

Fearing she had grieved her husband, she resumed her work ; but Horace leans back in his chair musing something must be wrong. The silence endured a long time ; suddenly a step sounded on the piazza ; it paused at the glass-door, at which a faint tap came.

"Horace ! what was that !"

"One of the servants, dear."

But suddenly she started up, a faint voice had cried—

"Lois ! Lois !"

Pale and frightened, Lois seized Horace's arm, half-sobbing—

“ Horace, 'twas Helen's voice.”

Thoughts of second sight, death warnings, crowded on her mind. Horace opened the door, a dark figure crouched there.

“ Who is that ? ”

“ Helen,” murmured a weak voice.

“ It is my sister,” half-screamed Lois, rushing forward to kneel beside the prostrate figure, “ Helen ! Helen ! what does it mean ? ”

With a faint smile on her wan, white face, Helen stretched out her arms bewildered. Horace carried her into the room. She gazed around her with dazzled eyes, the room went round, the flowers seemed to mingle their hues, Lois' pale face and sweet voice seemed very far off ; she fainted. When restored to life, they gently questioned her, and heard her sad tale ; her midnight flight ; hiding in various places, journey to India, her wanderings in search of them ; her final discovery of their home ; her sinking at their door. Though much startled, Lois strove to comfort her ; to cheer her, praising her re-

solve not to marry unloving, promising protection and help. Horace felt that out of his own abundant happiness he could give Helen generous sympathy. So she tarried with them; Lois writing to her father, begging his forgiveness for her sister; never doubting but that it would come. For Helen it was a time of bitter anxiety till the reply came. She stood in the sitting-room one day by the window, when Lois entered, a letter in her hand; her sad "Helen, my darling," and shocked face, told her the answer, before the words, spoken in a shaking voice—

"Our father will not forgive you."

Half unconsciously Helen held out her hand for the letter—

"Helen has made her bed, she must lie on it; she trifled with a true man's honest love, she is no longer my daughter."

Silently she laid it down, turning again to the window. Then her head sank on her breast; her hands went to her forehead. Slowly, slowly, she fell to the ground, murmuring—

"Father! Father!"

And these words were the oftenest on her lips during the long, tedious weeks that passed, when lying between life and death. She knew not even Lois' tender face.

Many months have passed since Helen crawled to her sister's door; nearly a year since her flight. She still remains with them. Her health was hard to re-establish. She received a generous-hearted letter from Lionel, granting his full pardon, and imploring hers.

They have come to live in a large city, and Helen, against Lois' wish, is going out as a governess, to a family living in a distant part of the hill country.

One morning she went to call on a Scotch lady, a great friend of Lois, but one she had never seen before. She was shown into a large room, prettily furnished. On the table was a portrait of a very lovely girl, with large grey eyes and flaxen curls.

Mrs. Elmond entered. She was a pretty woman, about thirty-four, with true Scotch physique, small blue eyes, and thick hair, of too decided a tint to be termed "auburn."

Taking both Helen's hands, she kissed her warmly, saying—

“I have heard all about you from dear little Lois. We shall be friends.”

“Will you be friends with poor, wretched me; you, who are so bright, so happy, so blessed with home and children?”

“Poor darling! You have suffered, but trust in Him, Who has said, ‘I will never leave you, nor forsake you.’ I, too, have suffered. Will you hear my tale?”

“I am Scotch, as you know, and can see (smiling). My father was a minister; my mother an invalid for many years. Our home, a grey old manse, in one of the loveliest parts of my ‘ain bonnie land.’ I see it now, the pale, pink roses, contrasting with the lichened walls; the lowing of the kine falls on my ear; the ripple of the burn is there; the grand ‘auld mountains above it a’.’ My only sister was two years my elder, but she seemed younger. She was so quiet, so gentle, while red-haired Maggie (myself) was so bustling and energetic. Ah, me, how we misjudge others. I half-despised Una at

times, for her listless gravity. When I was but seventeen, a stranger, named Lisle, an Englishman, came to our quiet village. He was fishing. I met him one day, a summer's afternoon. He asked me if I could tell him of some lodgings. I did. An old nurse of ours had a tidy room to let. He went there. My sister was reading to the old woman, a bunch of crimson roses on the little table by which she sat, roses I had scolded her for plucking. My father asked him to our house. We found him pleasant and merry. His mother, that winter, invited one of us to go to stay with her in her London home, in return for our hospitality, as she called it, to her son. I went. It was my first journey south. How well I recall that day, the arrival in the great metropolis. As the dusk fell, Lisle met me, and conducted me to his mother's home. How luxurious it seemed after our homely manse. Well, the days passed on. One evening there was a party given. Robed in white muslin, with pale forget-me-not wreaths, I glanced with satisfaction into my mirror. That night I met Henry Elmond, a

young officer. His dark eyes haunted my dreams (smiling) after our return home. And it seems he fell in love with my red hair. However, before my long visit ended, we were betrothed. Ah, my darling mother, how well I recall that first night at home, when, in the twilight, I showed her my ring of opals and diamonds. They say opals are unfortunate for gifts, but the tears they foretold fell not for any love trial; thank God, we never had any! The next summer Mrs. Lisle, her son, and my Henry came to visit us. Una had been betrothed by letter before to Clarence Lisle. One lovely summer's day they arrived; Una clad in white, with a bunch of crimson roses in her belt, watched their arrival from the window.

“My sweet sister, you may judge how lovely she was from her portrait on that table. Merry days succeeded, but soon a dire sorrow fell on us. Lisle and Una were to be married in early autumn. All was happy. One day, in my own self-assured temper, I insisted on plucking some flowers on a dangerous part of a lake, combating my

sister's opposition. I reached after them, fell in, the waters closing over my cry of agony. (She paused.) Una, the sister I had often reproved for want of courage, leapt in to save me, but—but (her voice fell almost to a whisper) she was drowned, and I was saved."

She ceased, a long silence ensued. Helen's tears flowed.

My dear, I will not tell you of the long sorrowful time that followed, of my anguish and remorse, my parents' bitter sorrow, the lover's passionate grief. We, my parents and I, went for a long time to a quiet lonely watering-place in the south of England; my mother died some little time after our return home. For four years, I and my father lived alone, then his time came. I went to Mrs. Lisle's, and six months after, I and Henry were married. Then we came to India. My dear, you see my sorrow was greater than yours. You may hope for better times. Lisle works hard as a barrister, he has never forgotten Una; his mother is dead. Helen Mervyn, I have suffered, but God is very merciful; I am happy, happy in my husband

and my children, sure that He has forgiven my wilful spirit."

Helen dried her tears; somehow, Mrs. Elmond's tale, sad as it was, had left a ray of comfort with her desolate spirit. There is no grief that Christ cannot heal!

After a long time, Maggie resumed her usual cheerfulness, and took her visitor to her nursery to show her her children. One child especially attracted Helen's attention; she was like her mother, but more lovely, her eyes larger, her hair tinged strongly with gold, her complexion clear. Like a little cherub did she look, reminding Helen of Sir Joshua Reynold's picture of cherubim heads.

"This is Maggie," said Mrs. Elmond, "I pray God she may be spared her mother's faults and trials, and, in after days, make amends for all Maggie Elmond's shortcomings. This (her voice grew tenderer) is my Una, she is strangely like my sister; I look forward to our return to England, that poor Clarence's eyes may be gladdened by the sight of her."

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Helen reached her destination in the hill country at nightfall. Leaving her conveyance at the gate, she passed up the narrow path to the door; just as she reached it, a little figure in white sped past her like a wraith into the thick shrubbery. Half-startled, she smiled at her nervousness, and knocked at the door. An English servant opened it, and ushered her into a room, where a lady and gentleman were engaged—the one in reading, the other at some light fancy work. There was a certain English air in the room, and ornaments that warmed her heart. She was welcomed kindly by her new employers, who, in part, knew her history. Mrs. Pherson was a languid, gentle woman, a fair type of the Anglo-Indian lady. Like Mrs. Elmond, she was Scotch by birth, and must once have been a very pretty specimen of the highest kind of Scotch beauty, but life in India for many years, combined with some inertness and indisposition, had faded the delicate complexion, and rendered the clear eyes somewhat dim; but the light golden hair yet waved luxuriantly over her

brow. Her husband was a kindly, grave-faced man—an officer.

“Maggie Elmond has told me of you,” remarked Mrs. Pherson. “Dear Maggie, it is very wonderful to me how she keeps so cheerful. Perhaps you have heard her sad story. Poor thing, she blamed herself too sorely at the time. But now she is as energetic as ever, even after some years’ residence in this dreadful climate. For me, when I meet her, she is like a breath of pure mountain air, reminding me of heather sprays, sunrise glittering on the lakes, and other reminiscences of my girlhood. It seems so long since I breathed my own mountain air.”

Helen’s future pupils were now summoned. The eldest was a pretty girl of sixteen, very much like her mother. The next, “the white wraith,” Gladys, a pale, thin child of thirteen years, with large grey eyes, with something half-weird in their expression, and very long pale hair. Helen smiled as she greeted her, little thinking what influence Gladys was to bear on her future life. The others were a boy of ten years, and a rosy-faced

little girl some three or four years his junior. Time passed on, Helen grew used to her new life, finding plenty of employment in attending to her pupils, who were far from perfect. Emily, the elder, was somewhat affected and listless, too vain of her pretty face. The boy was mischievous, and often almost unmanageable, while Gladys (her favourite) would be sometimes provokingly wild and thoughtless, though withal so affectionate that Helen could scarce scold her. For more than a year had Helen been with the Phersons, not all unhappy, hoping for "better times," cheered by Mrs. Elmond's bright letters. Often did she think of her early discontent, with her luxurious life. Now, through many troubles, has she come to the fulfilment of that dream, finding it sometimes irksome to be always employed, for though Mrs. Pherson was considerate, yet "Miss Mervyn" was but the "governess," and her children must not be neglected. Still it gratified Helen to see her pupils improvement—the fresh industry of the one, the quiet docility of the other. One evening all were assembled in the drawing-

room. Helen robed in plain white, a rich crimson flower in her hair, looked even more beautiful than of yore. Trouble had not faded her beauty, the pretty black-lashed eyes had now a look of sweetness, and the mouth an expression of strength and endurance formerly wanting in the delicate face. Gladys clung round her, looking at the book of pictures she held, while the little one nestled at her feet.

Suddenly the door bell clanged. Gladys cried—

“Oh, that must be the new doctor; he was coming here to-night. Such a nice gentleman, Miss Mervyn. We called there yesterday; his wife is so pretty.”

Helen smiled, and hushed her chatter, for the servant was admitting the visitor. Glancing carelessly up, she saw, bowing to Mrs. Pherson, with the smile she remembered so well, Algernon Thornleigh. She gasped for breath, looking round as if to escape. He did not perceive her at first, but now Mrs. Pherson introduced him to her governess, Miss Mervyn.

He started, looking as though his eyesight were deceiving him, half muttered—

“Helen!”

But she recovered her composure, and bowed, extending her hand.

“We have met before,” she explained to Mrs. Pherson.

Algernon took the cue, and bowed silently. For some moments Helen lingered, pretending to amuse the children as before, but furtively watching him as he conversed with Mrs. Pherson. He was altered—six years could not but have changed him. He looked somewhat older than his twenty-eight years, and graver than of old; but his eyes had still their frank expression, their genial gaze. Gladys' words, “His wife is so pretty,” flashed into her mind. He was married, then; had forgotten her. Could she expect it to be otherwise? But yet tears filled her eyes. Rising, she quitted the room, and passed out to the piazza. The moon shone clearly, the air felt cool after the hot room. She sat down, striving to calm her thoughts. He was married! Then her half-acknow-

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ledged day-dream of one day meeting him again, and for ensuing happiness for both must end.

"Farewell to all such romantic thoughts," she muttered to herself bitterly. What was his wife like? She would ask Gladys; she felt curious to know.

About an hour afterwards he came forth. Pausing as he saw her, he came towards her—

"Helen—Miss Mervyn, how is it we meet here?"

She answered, "I am the governess."

"So I am told. May (pardon me) wrote to me the account of your flight; but she did not know where you were, but believed you were with your sister."

"No; my father refused to receive me again. I could not burthen my sister and her husband with my support. I prefer the life I am leading."

"Sir Edward refuses to forgive you?"

"Yes; but I was very ill soon after I came here to India. Lois wrote again to my father, and he sent a kind of pardon; but it

was so scant, I could not go home. He does not wish it."

Her voice sank—tears came.

"Poor Helen! You must have suffered. Excuse my seeming curiosity, but—but I hardly know how to express it; but I suppose you did not care for Sir Lionel Branscombe?"

"No. But I would rather not speak of that subject."

Her voice was haughty. What mattered it to him what her reason was for breaking off her engagement, when he was married. He apologised, then offering his hand, left her with a courteous bow.

Left alone, Helen's control gave way. She wept till exhausted. She leant wearily against the wall. A small white figure stole to her side.

"Miss Mervyn, will you not take cold? Mamma wants to know where you are."

Then, seeing Helen's white face and heavy eyes, Gladys knelt down by her, twining her arms round her—

"Dear Miss Mervyn, you are in trouble.

Tell me it. I don't think you liked Dr. Thornleigh. You seemed afraid of him. Was he unkind to you ? ”

Helen half laughed a hysterical laugh. Then breaking down utterly, she sobbed bitterly, leaning against Gladys.

“ What is Mrs. Thornleigh like ? ”

“ Very pretty ; fair, with braided hair, and large brown eyes. So nice, too. Dr. Thornleigh is pleasant also.”

Helen whispered, “ Did she seem happy ? ”

“ Oh yes,” was the ready answer, then a wondering look came in the grey eyes.

“ Miss Mervyn, did you love him, years ago, before you came to India ? ”

Helen started ! This strange child had found out her secret. In her bitter need of sympathy, she told her tale to her young pupil, who comforted her with tearful words and tender caresses. They went in as the light from the hall lamp fell on Gladys' face. Helen was astonished to see a deep crimson colour on the usually white face ; there was a strange glitter in her eyes.

“ I fear, my love, you don't feel well ? ”

(laying her hand on the child's heated forehead).

Gladys' lips quivered, "No, I have felt ill all day."

The next morning she was unable to rise, as night fell she was delirious with a kind of fever. For many hours unconscious words fell from her lips. Helen's story was evidently on her mind, for often she would say, "Mamma, poor Miss Mervyn is so sad, she loved Dr. Thornleigh; he is married." Her mother thought it but the fancy of her delirious brain; but poor Helen shrank in shamed dismay, as she thought Algernon would hear the words. The following afternoon, the patient seemed a little better. Helen, who had escaped from the room on the doctor's arrival, was in the drawing-room, nervously awaiting his departure. But, to her dismay, the firm tread tarried at the door, the handle was turned, he entered, looking flushed and puzzled. Striving to look composed, Helen felt her face crimson. He looked at her keenly and curiously, "Helen, Helen, my own love," he said, half hesita-

tingly ; she started, looking at him with great amazed eyes. He took her hand, "Helen, I love you still, and you, from that poor child's words, you still care for me." With an indignant cry, she strove to draw her hand away. He looked pale and said, "Am I mistaken?"

"How dare you, sir," bursting into tears.

He let fall her hand, and drew himself up, an expression of dignity in his eyes. "How dare I? Do you forget, I once told you I loved you, and you confessed you returned it. I find you homeless and almost friendless, a dependant. I am now a physician, no longer the poor student, and you despise me, when Helen Mervyn, of the Hall, did not."

She looked astonished and stammered, "Your wife?"

He looked amazed. "My wife?"

"Yes (a gleam of hope in her eyes), Gladys says you are married."

His face cleared, a smile spread over it, developing into a genial laugh.

"Poor little Cissy! what a mistake! it is Harry's wife! He is married and lives with

me; Cissy is not my wife, but my sister-in-law."

Helen sank into a chair, confused, glad, half stunned.

"Miss Gladys made a mistake, for which I thank her, since it paved the way for me. For Helen, I do not think I should have 'dared' to ask you again, unless I had received some convincing proof of your love—and you were so cold that night. You do love me?"

"Can you forgive me Algernon?"

"Forgive you, my darling, when you have suffered so much?"

Mrs. Pherson, coming in sometime later, was surprised to find the doctor still there, and to see her governess's happy face; but all was soon explained. Still there was a drawback to their joy, for Helen resolved to go to England and strive to be reconciled ere marrying Algernon—

"It would be so much better if my father gave his consent. But if he refuse it, and to receive me, my duty will be, not for him, but to obey my husband" (with a smile).

When Gladys had recovered Helen told her all, to the child's delight; then returning to Lois' home, Helen one day embarked for England, amidst the tears, smiles, and good-wishes of her friends.

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Christmas Eve had come; Sir Edward Mervyn sat by his lonely hearth, in the dining-room, which the servants had hung with red-berried holly to make it "as cheerful as possible for poor old master." Yes, the stately, proud man merited now the pity of his own servants. Bowed and melancholy eyed, he sat over his glowing fire, seeing strange visions of past days in its crimson flames that leaped and danced, throwing such weird shadows round the room. Scraps of the minister's sermon last Sunday returned now and again to his mind, warnings against pride and unforgiving hearts. He had met little Maud that day, and, won by her merry dark eyes, had had her up to his lonely house. The child's simple words had, unconsciously, carried on the minister's work.

"Yes, Bob broke my best wax doll that brother Algie sent from India, I was so angry ; but sister Maylie told me that Jesus Christ would not forgive me if I didn't Robert. And she said it was Christmas-tide, and all should be friends."

"Do you love brother Algie ?"

"I almost forget him, but Maylie makes me always pray for him, night and morning."

"What do you say, child ?" he had asked softly, dropping his grey head against her soft, fair curls.

"I pray God to keep him from all ill, and to make him happy."

"Child, if I could make one you loved very, very happy, would you love me ?"

"Yes, very much" (the rosy lips smiling).

Thus Maud's words had softened the stern old heart, and he longed for his daughter's presence bitterly. Never before had he let himself perceive how much he missed her, but to-night a sob shook his frame, as he thought of Lois' account of her illness. Her plaintive "Father, Father," seemed to sound

in his ear, and that other voice, that all this time had never left him, rung on it still—

“Be very tender with my little Nell.”

I will write to the poor child to-morrow to tell her to come home.

“Father! Father!”

The shadowy, far-off words had become a reality. Half-fearfully, he looked around.

There stood Helen! She fell at his feet in silence. A pause ensued. Then the last remnants of stern, unforgiving pride melted from his heart; tears fell down his cheek. He threw his arms around her, and raised her—

“Forgive me, my daughter.”

What a joyful Christmas morn was that to Helen, awaking in her own old room; her father's forgiving words yet fresh on her heart; his sanction to her engagement yet thrilling her with thankful joy.

She soon joined her father, whose face looked happier than it had ever done since his wife's death.

And she had come to him in a dream that night, with youthful face, robed in white, an

olive branch in her hand, saying, in her old bright tones—

“Blessed are the merciful.”

The dream faded ; the strain of seraphic music died away. He awoke, to see moonlight streaming over the oaken floor, and to hear the midnight chimes ringing out the tidings of “Peace on earth.”

May Thornleigh was now a woman of twenty-six. Her face had a certain wistful gravity. Louisa was married, and little Kitty a girl of fifteen. Her “children” were, indeed, growing up apace, even Maud, whose form seemed too tall for her ten years.

This morning she thought of Helen Mervyn, as she had so often done—shrinking from the thought of seeing poor Sir Edward’s stooping form, and grave, sad face—come up the decked church, between the rows of happy families, re-united for Christmas. But this morning his step is firm, his figure upright, his eyes soft and happy. Beside him walks a beautiful woman, who, as she passes her, turns, with a subdued, yet radiant smile, that tells her all is well.



For the next few months Helen and her father are alone.

They come from India, Lois, her husband, and "little Nellie;" Mrs Elmond, her family, and Gladys Pherson and Algernon, all to be present at Helen's wedding.

Unclouded happiness reigns that summer day, as clear as the deep blue sky. Gladys, Kitty, and Maud are the bridesmaids. As the wedding group leave the church, Lois sees Lionel Branscombe amongst the spectators, looking, not at the bride, but at May Thornleigh. Something in his look tells a tale to Lois' sharp eyes. Obtaining her father's permission, she tarries to bid him to the ball. He comes, and on the evening of Helen Mervyn's wedding-day May learns that her faithful love is rewarded at last.





EPILOGUE.

YEARS went by. Sir Horace and Lady Gresham (for Horace has been created a baronet, for signal services to his country) now live with Sir Edward Mervyn, at the old house, where, once again, a Helen reigns. A Helen of the far-off days, of the old man's youth, his eldest grandchild, who is so like her dearly-loved grandmother. Her mother often declares "Nellie" is spoilt, but the old man refuses to see it, alleging she is unspoilable.

Near Elmsford live Sir Lionel and his wife, who, amidst all her happiness never forgets her "charge." Maud lives with her, but May sometimes fears she shall not keep her much longer. Willie's wife presides over the old

home. He is succeeding in his father's steps. Harry still lives in India; Kitty is gone to a home of her own. Helen and Algernon live chiefly in London, where he is a rising physician. Gladys lived with her some years, on account of her health, till her parents came back to Scotland, when she rejoined them. Maggie Elmond lives near London, and Clarence Lisle's great pet is Una. The next marriage in the family will be that of Edgar Thornleigh and Gladys Pherson, who, when speaking of love-trials, say, with Mrs Elmond, "they are thankful they never had any."

THE END.



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